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Allegiances

RiverClan

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Perchpaw

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Apprentice, Coralpaw

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Apprentice, Lilypaw

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Apprentice, Creekpaw

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Creekpaw - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Lilypaw - White she-cat with pale tortoiseshell splashes, pale green eyes.

Perchpaw - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Coralpaw - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes. Mother to Frozenripple's kits:

Heartkit - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Heronkit - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Finkit - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes. Expecting Mudslip's kits.

Elders

Dewwhisker - Gray and white tom with black spots, blue eyes.

Shadepath - Dark gray she-cat with a striped tail and white muzzle, dark green eyes.

ShadowClan

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sparrowflight - brown and ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Apprentice, Cougarpaw

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cliffpaw

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentices

Cougarpaw - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffpaw - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Queens

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Buzzardglare's kits:

Poppykit - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Cobrakit - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes. Mother to Baconstripe's kits:

Maplekit - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosekit - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkkit - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Carrottail's kits.

Elders

Vulturewing - Big black and dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Twigleaf - Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

ThunderClan

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skunktail - Fluffy black and white tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Vanillapaw

Owlblaze - Brown and white tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Breezepaw

Sorrelshine - Golden brown and ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Wolftail - Very thick furred dark gray tom with white paws and muzzle, blue eyes.

Thornsting - Light brown tom with dark ginger stripes, yellow eyes.

Hickoryroot - Brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WindClan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

SkyClan

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Prologue

[image]

The sun rested just above the trees in the distance. Buildings cast long shadows across the short, mangled grass that patched the earth around the outskirts of twolegplace. A brown tabby quickly rounded the corner of a building, a scrawny mouse in his jaws. His amber eyes flashed around warily before he hurried toward an abandoned shed. A moldy wooden door hung open on one rusty hinge, just wide enough for a mouse to pass through. The tom nudged the door open further with his muzzle and pushed into the shed.

The parted door allowed a bar of light inside. The wooden walls and floors were worn and home to dozens of spider webs. Cats lay along the walls of the shed, some asleep, while others lay awake, eyes gleaming in the darkness. An old armchair stood against the wall facing the door, it's cushion dirty and ripped. A black tom lay curled up in the chair, facing the wall. The tabby quickly approached the chair, dipping his head as he dropped the mouse on the floor.

"Bone Shred, I brought the mouse like you asked," The tom meowed, lifting his head to the cat in the chair.

He stirred and turned his head away from the shadows. His face was hidden behind a fox skull that rested over his head, boney canine teeth stretching alongside his exposed jaw. His black fur was only disturbed by three white streaks on each of his sides that almost looked like ribs painted onto his pelt. His expression was

unreadable behind the skull. His eyes were hidden in the shadows of round empty eye sockets. A growl rumbled in his throat, and the tabby shrunk back. "*This* is what you brought me?" Bone Shred rose to his paws and leapt down from the chair in front of the tabby.

"I-it's all I could find," The tabby stammered, his eyes round with unease. "I didn't see any other mice out there."

Bone Shred lashed his thick black tail as he growled, looking straight at the cat who had failed him.

"Don't blame Talon Strike." A black tom meowed from where he sat in the shadows, green eyes glowing. "He's right. Prey is very scarce here."

A she-cat beside the tom nodded. "Right. It's always been hard to find food here." She lashed her tail. "Why do we even stay?"

"We're all starving!" Another cat added.

"Enough!" Bone Shred snarled, and every cat fell silent. "There's nothing we can do but fight for survival." He looked at the dozens of cats around him. "More cats mean less prey."

Talon Strike blinked. "I'm not sure that's true..."

The black tom swung his head to the tabby. "Are you saying I'm wrong?" He demanded, his claws sliding out from under his black fur.

"No, of course not!" Talon Strike bowed his head respectfully, his ears flattening. "I-I just heard a couple cats talking today about a large group of cats living in a forest beyond highstones. Larger than ours." The other cats began to murmur in surprise as he went on. "I just thought if that many cats can survive in that place, there must be plenty of prey."

Bone Shred studied him, his tail twitching slowly. "Sounds like an ideal place to settle... Where is this forest?"

"I don't know." Talon Strike responded.

"I see." The black tom was silent for a moment before he snarled and leaped at the tabby, claws outstretched. Talon Strike let out a startled yowl as he was pinned. Bone Shred dug his claws into his shoulders and lunged down, sinking his teeth into the tabby's throat. No cat dared to speak as they watched the cat go limp, blood oozing onto the wooden floor. Bone Shred stepped away from him, blood running down his chin.

A red and white tom stepped to Bone Shred's side, twitching an ear as he glanced at Talon Strike's body. "He was always weak." He flicked his amber gaze to his leader. "So what are we going to do about that forest?"

"I think it's obvious what we need to do, Crimson Ice." A young golden brown and black she-cat stepped out of the shadows, her amber eyes gleaming. "It sounds as if this forest is a fine opportunity. Plenty of prey... Shelter..." She purred. "My brother would be a fool to pass this up."

Bone Shred glared at her. "You seem to think that being my sister gives you the right to speak to me differently, Poisoned Sap." He stepped toward her until she was forced to face the dark empty eye sockets. "Know that I care for you just the same as the rest of these fleabags, and I won't hesitate to kill you if you betray me."

Poisoned Sap twitched her tail. "Very well." She dipped her head.

"We must find this forest!" Bone Shred whipped his head to the other cats. "We will find it and make it our home."

Crimson Ice narrowed his eyes. "And this group of cats living there..?"

The rogue leader flexed his claws. "They won't be an issue," He growled. "We'll make them leave."

"And if they refuse?" Poisoned Sap asked.

A purr rumbled in Bone Shred's throat as he rested his empty gaze on Talon Strike's body. "Then they will die one by one until their land is ours."

Chapter 1

[image]

"From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Icepaw. Your mentor will be Frozenripple."

The newly made apprentice raised his sleek white head, curling his tail in excitement. *I'm an apprentice! I'm finally an apprentice!*

"Icepaw! Blizzardpaw! Winterpaw!" The clan called out the names of the three siblings, their eyes shining. Icepaw saw his parents, Grayshadow and Whitedapple, sitting by the nursery, their eyes lit with pride as they watched their kits. But despite everything happening around him, Icepaw's attention drifted toward the reeds lining the river that encircled the camp. Soft green land stretched out as far as he could see, the bright blue sky splotched with fluffy clouds. He stared out into the distance, his paws itching with excitement. In the nursery, he'd longed for the day when he could leave the camp to explore. *I'm finally free to see the world!*

Frozenripple stepped forward and leaned in to touch noses with his new apprentice, but Icepaw ignored him, staring at the camp entrance eagerly. *I have to explore!* With an excited yowl, he pelted toward the entrance, hardly aware of the startled reactions of his clanmates.

"What's he doing?"

"Icepaw? Come back!"

He bounded across the stepping stones, his paws slipping once, but he only let out an amused laugh and continued onto the territory, his heart racing with excitement. *Wow!* His blue eyes flashed around in awe as he ran, taking in every tree, bush, and creature he passed. The grass felt warm and soft under his paws, the air brushing past him. He paused beside a small tree, resting his front paws on the trunk as he tilted his head back, staring up into the branches. Sunlight shone through the fresh green leaves. A robin

perched in one of the branches, chirping happily. Icepaw let out a purr. *It's everything I thought it would be!*

Something flashed out of the corner of his eye, and he snapped his attention to it. A small white butterfly fluttered over the grass. With a purr Icepaw abandoned the tree and pelted after the insect gleefully. His pursuit of the butterfly ended when it settled on a stone across a broad stretch of grass.

Icepaw stumbled to a halt and watched the butterfly twitch it's wings for a moment before it turned on him. He jerked back in surprise when it landed on his nose, waving it's wings at him. He chuckled and it fluttered away. He watched it for a moment before blinking around, suddenly aware of how far he'd ran. *Where am I?* He sniffed the air. RiverClan scent was faint here. *Did I cross the border?* He stared into the distance. He saw trees and strange looking shapes in the distance, like stone walls. *I wonder what's out there...* He started forward.

"Icepaw!"

He nearly jumped out of his fur. He spun and saw his mentor, Frozenripple, racing toward him, his long fur brushing against the grass. The pale silver tabby was panting when he reached Icepaw. "What are you doing?" He gulped in air. "Running off like that? You nearly scared your parents half to death!"

Icepaw ducked his head. "Sorry," He mumbled, though he wasn't. *I had to see the territory! I've been dying to leave the camp for moons*! "I can't wait to see the world!"

Frozenripple twitched his ear. "The world? You're not a rogue, Icepaw. You're a clan cat. That means you stay within your borders."

What? Icepaw blinked in disbelief. "But there's so much to see! Surely I'm allowed to explore beyond clan territory once in a while?"

The long furred warrior looked startled. "No, you're not." As Icepaw's heart swelled with disappointment, he went on. "Your clan

needs you here to hunt and patrol. You're going to be a warrior one day, and that means being loyal to your clan."

Icepaw's tail lashed. "I'm not disloyal!" He looked away from Frozenripple to stare out beyond the border. "I'm just curious."

His mentor sighed. "All young cats are. You'll grow out of it." He twitched his fluffy tail. "There's nothing but rogues, kittypets, and danger out there."

I wonder what rogues and kittypets are like? Icepaw thought. *And what twolegs and other creatures are out there?*

"Let's go back to camp. Everyone's wondering where you ran off to." Frozenripple turned back toward the camp, waving his tail for his apprentice to follow.

Icepaw padded after him slowly, his tail drooping. *I don't want to be stuck here forever when there's a whole world waiting to be discovered!* An idea sparked in his mind, and his heartbeat quickened excitedly. *I don't care what Frozenripple says. As long as no one finds out, I can go wherever I please...*

Allegiance update #1

RiverClan

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Apprentice, Heronpaw

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Heartpaw

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Finpaw

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Lilynose - White she-cat with pale tortoiseshell splashes, pale green eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Heartpaw - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue

eyes.

Heronpaw - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Finpaw - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Queens

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes. Mother to Mudslip's kits:

Newtkit - Thin black and brown tabby tom with a red striped tail, amber eyes.

Warmkit - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckkit - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Elders

Dewwhisker - Gray and white tom with black spots, blue eyes.

Shadepath - Dark gray she-cat with a striped tail and white muzzle, dark green eyes.

ShadowClan

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sparrowflight - brown and ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw,

dark blue eyes.

Apprentice, Cougarpaw

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cliffpaw

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentices

Cougarpaw - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffpaw - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Queens

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Buzzardglare's kits:

Poppykit - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Cobrakit - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes. Mother to Baconstripe's kits:

Maplekit - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosekit - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkkit - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Carrottail's kits.

Elders

Vulturewing - Big black and dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Twigleaf - Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

ThunderClan

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WindClan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

SkyClan

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 2

[image]

"And then... Pounce!" The white tom shot forward into the air, his claws outstretched and ready to pin his target. When he hit the ground, he dug his claws into the mouse. It let out a startled shriek before it went limp. "See?" He purred, turning to his audience.

Two tom's sat a few fox lengths away, watching him. "Wow!" The small cream colored tom's eyes were round with interest, while the bigger yellow and cream tom looked unphased. "That was awesome, Icepaw!"

His tail flicked with irritation, though he was mildly amused as well. "It's Iceslide!" He reminded the tom. "I became a warrior moons ago, remember?"

"So?" The cream tom blinked.

"So my name changes!" Iceslide huffed. "I explained all of that!"

The tom shrugged and lifted a hind leg to scratch behind the blue collar around his neck. "Yeah, well, I think it's stupid," He grunted. "My name has always been Truffle. I'm not just going to let someone start calling me Trufflebutt one day."

The bigger tom let out an amused purr. "Trufflebutt."

Truffle spun to face his companion, fur bristling. "Shut up, Sulfur!" He sprang at the yellow tom, and the two broke into a play fight, pawing and yowling at each other.

Iceslide rolled his eyes. He'd known these two for many moons. Truffle was a kittypet, but he rarely saw him in twolegplace. The tom enjoyed adventure almost as much as Iceslide did, taking every chance to explore the territory beyond his yard. He'd met Truffle one day on the outskirts of RiverClan territory. The kittypet was no coward. He'd attacked Iceslide and knocked him right off his paws.

However, he hadn't had a clue what to do next. Truffle had been aggressive and rude at first, but the more Iceslide got to know him, the more he liked the kittypet's spunk. Then there was Sulfur, a rogue Truffle had introduced him to. The tom was very independent, and more intelligent than Truffle. He could fight and hunt very well. Iceslide thought he could make a good warrior if he didn't like being alone so much.

"Give in?" Sulfur's meow broke Iceslide out of his thoughts, and he blinked to see the yellow and cream tom had Truffle pinned into the grass, his paws planted firmly on his shoulders.

The kittypet struggled under him, paws flailing. "Get off me, you hefty brute!" He spat in annoyance. Sulfur stepped back, his yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. Truffle scrambled to his paws, shaking scraps of grass from his pelt. Iceslide chuckled to himself, padding toward his friends.

Truffle glanced at him. "I wish I could fight like you and Sulfur," He grumbled. "I'm no match for even a kitten! I can't even hunt for myself, I have to rely on my housefolk."

"I can show you." Iceslide offered eagerly. "You could be my apprentice!"

The cream tom blinked. "Really?"

"Of course!" Iceslide straightened, lifting his chin high and imagining he were Shimmerstar. "From this day forward, until you earn your warrior name-"

Truffle exchanged a look with Sulfur. "What's he meowing about?"

"-You shall be known as Trufflepaw!"

"No!" The kittypet gasped, his yellow eyes lighting with anger. "I'm Truffle!"

Iceslide leaned forward, his whiskers twitching with amusement. "Truffle*paw!"* He corrected. "Until you earn your warrior name, Trufflebutt!" The tom let out a horrified wail. Iceslide and Sulfur broke into laughter.

Sulfur nudged the kittypet. "Shouldn't you be back with your twolegs before sundown, Trufflepaw?" At the mention of the time, Iceslide became aware of the sun setting behind them. *I should get back to camp. I've been here since sunhigh!*

"I have to go." Iceslide meowed. "My clanmates are going to start pestering me again." Last time he spent this much time away from his clan, Shimmerstar had scorned him for being lazy. He wasn't lazy! He was exploring! *They're the lazy ones for spending their lives in the same place.* He thought. *I'm seeing the world.* He waved his tail to his companions before turning and bounding back into RiverClan territory. He stayed close to the WindClan border, hoping to avoid any of his clanmates who may catch him sneaking back to camp.

"Hey, Iceslide!"

He nearly jumped out of his fur, thinking one of his clanmates had spotted him. But he stopped and spun to see two familiar WindClan warriors padding toward the border, eyes friendly. One was an orange tom with a reddish tail and ears, the other a dark gray-black tom.

"Hey!" Iceslide relaxed and approached them, purring a greeting. "Firetail, Soakedears." They were young warriors, about his age. They'd met at a gathering as apprentices and had been friends ever since. "How's the prey running in WindClan?"

"Fast as usual." Firetail purred, waving his red tail in the air. "But green-leaf has been good to us."

Soakedears twitched his black ears for which he was named for. "Is all well in RiverClan?"

Iceslide nodded. "Everything's great." *I think...* He spent so much time away from his clan, he really wasn't sure if anything new was happening. *And I'd better get back there to find out!* "I'm sorry." He dipped his head. "I can't talk today, I have to get back to camp."

"Of course." Firetail meowed. "Take care." When the WindClan cats said goodbye, Iceslide turned and continued racing back to camp. He bounded over the stepping stones, hearing the river running

softly below him. He entered the clearing and glanced around. No cat seemed to have seen him arrive. Frozenripple and Petalfin were sharing tongues by the side of the clearing, looking happy and content. Shorestep was demonstrating a hunting crouch for her new apprentice, Heartpaw. Swanpool was basking in the sun, her white pelt tinted orange in the sunset. Sunripple and Mudslip spoke to each other quietly by the fresh kill pile.

He huffed out a sigh of relief. *Thank Starclan!* He started forward.

"Iceslide?"

He flinched. *Great...* He reluctantly turned to see that Frostedcloud, the clan deputy, had approached him. *Here we go again...* Last time he'd returned to camp so late, he'd been given a lecture about loyalty. *Obviously I'm loyal to RiverClan!* "Good day, Frostedcloud." He offered a purr.

The white tom looked unimpressed. His pale blue eyes narrowed. "You haven't brought back any prey again?"

Iceslide hesitated, his mind scrambling for an excuse. "I... I hunted this morning," He meowed.

"On whose patrol?" Frostedcloud asked, obviously unconvinced.

"Um... Mine." Iceslide twitched his tail. "I went out on my own."

The deputy snorted. "As usual. And where have you been all day?"

"Keeping our borders safe, Frostedcloud." He responded coolly. "In fact, I ran into Firetail and Soakedears. They said WindClan is well."

"And how is that of interest to me?" Frostedcloud demanded. "RiverClan is our primary concern, Iceslide. I hope you don't forget that." With that, the white tom turned away to speak with Shallowpool.

What a rude piece of fox dung! Iceslide stifled back a growl of annoyance. *I'll do what I please! It doesn't make me any less loyal to RiverClan!*

"Iceslide!"

What now? Iceslide glanced over his shoulder to see a white and pale tortoiseshell splashed she-cat hurrying toward him, her pale green eyes glowing with happiness. "Hi, Lilynose," He meowed.

"I haven't seen you all day!" She exclaimed, sitting beside him hesitantly. "What have you been up to?"

At least some cat seemed to miss me. He thought. "Err, not much." He looked beyond her and spotted his littermates, Blizzardfur and Winterlight, with Coralshine. "I'm going to talk to my littermates," He meowed, quickly moving away from Lilynose. "See you."

"O-oh, okay..." The she-cat sounded disappointed, but Iceslide ignored her as he headed toward his littermates.

Winterlight's pale yellow ears flicked forward when she saw her brother. "Iceslide!" She purred, stepping forward to bump heads with him. "Where have you been?"

"On patrol," Iceslide meowed hesitantly. "What-" He broke off when he saw Coralshine rubbing her head against Blizzardfur's thick neck fur. The two cats purred loudly. "What's happening?" Iceslide blinked.

Coralshine let out a purr of amusement. "What do you think, mouse-brain?"

"We've just decided to be mates!" Blizzardfur blurted out, his blue eyes lit with joy. "Isn't that great?"

Iceslide stared at them, stunned. I never even realized they were so close! "Of course! Congratulations!"

As the couple purred and touched noses, Grayshadow and Whitedapple approached, purring at their kits.

"I'm so proud of you." Whitedapple purred, rasping her tongue over Blizzardfur's ear. "You'll be a great father someday."

Grayshadow gestured to the fresh-kill pile. "Iceslide, did you see

what your sister caught?" He prompted. "That huge trout? She caught it all on her own!"

Winterlight ducked her head in embarrassment. "It's nothing."

"Certainly not! It's the biggest trout I've ever seen!" Grayshadow purred proudly. "Frostedcloud puts you on so many patrols because you're one of the best hunters in the clan."

Iceslide let out a purr. "That's great, Winterlight!"

His parents turned their attention to him. "What have you done today, Iceslide?" Whitedapple asked.

His pelt prickled with unease. "Umm... I caught a fish..."

He was answered by silence. After a moment, Grayshadow forced a purr. "Well done."

I'm such a disappointment to them. Iceslide thought. *But I'm happy with my life. I don't care what they think of me!*

"It's coming!" A wail rang out from across the clearing. The cats around him spun to see what was going on. Otterpelt, the medicine cat apprentice, had raced to the center of the clearing, her yellow eyes round with alarm. "There's a darkness coming!"

"Otterpelt!" Maplesky shouldered his way through the crowd to his apprentice, looking worried. "Be quiet! I told you, the dream wasn't an omen, it was-"

"No!" She ignored her mentor and continued to speak. "I saw a darkness destroy our clan!" She cried. "The river ran with blood, and-" She shrunk back, whimpering. "There were cat skulls and bones everywhere..."

The clan broke into anxious murmurs, exchanging terrified glances. "What do you mean?" Swanpool gasped.

"Will RiverClan be destroyed? Driven out?" Dipfoot demanded anxiously.

Iceslide stared at Otterpelt, his fur bristling. *That can't be true! Nothing can destroy us! There must always be five clans!*

"Otterpelt!" Maplesky hissed and gently shouldered her away, looking around at everyone apologetically. "Excuse her, she had a nightmare. There's nothing to worry about. Even medicine cats have regular dreams, and sometimes it's hard to tell what's an omen and what's just a nightmare." He nudged Otterpelt back toward their den "Come, you need to relax."

"I'm telling you, Maplesky, I know what I saw!" Otterpelt wailed, and every cat stared after her anxiously. "RiverClan is doomed!"

Chapter 3

[image]

In the following days, the clan had been very unsettled by Otterpelt's omen, despite Maplesky's attempts to calm them. No cat seemed sure what was going to happen.

"Cat skulls and bones..." Cherryberry shivered, her amber eyes round. "Will we die out?" Not far from her, Dipfoot and Shallowpool sat together, speaking quietly.

"Otterpelt said the river was running with blood," Dipfoot meowed uneasily.

His mate nodded nervously. "It must mean death... Perhaps a battle?"

Iceslide crouched by the fresh kill pile, nibbling at a trout as he listened to his clanmates ponder about the dream. It was making him uneasy too, but he tried to push it to the back of his mind. He didn't want to think about what doom might await them.

Shorestep padded past him, her apprentice following. "What if Otterpelt's right?" Heartpaw asked, her blue eyes wide with fear. "Are we going to die? Is Riverclan doomed?"

The sandy brown and white she-cat turned to the apprentice, her green eyes gentle. "Hush, there's nothing to worry about." She promised. "Maplesky has been a medicine cat since I was just a kit. He knows what he's doing. If he says it was an ordinary dream, he's right."

Heartpaw hesitated. "But..."

"Nothing is going to happen to RiverClan." Shorestep twitched her ears toward the elders den. "Dewwhisker and Shadepath need fresh bedding. Why don't you go take care of that?"

The silver and white apprentice reluctantly nodded and quickened her pace across the clearing. Shorestep turned away, her eyes flickering with unease. *Even she isn't sure.* Iceslide thought. *She just doesn't want the younger cats to worry.* He grunted and stretched out his front paws and arched his back, growing bored eavesdropping on his clanmates. An idea flashed in his mind. *I haven't been in twolegplace for a while.* He'd made several kittypet friends there. *I wonder how they are?* Shimmerstar and Salmonstripe lay together by the tree stump where meetings were called. Dipfoot and Shallowpool had their backs to him now, and Shorestep disappeared into the warriors den. *The coast is clear!* He got to his paws, glancing around before heading toward the camp exit.

"Shimmerstar?"

Fox dung! Iceslide awkwardly changed direction as Frostedcloud walked past him. He sat down and awkwardly started cleaning himself. The deputy glanced over his shoulder at him briefly before continuing toward Shimmerstar. The silver spotted she-cat was laying against her mate, Salmonstripe, who was grooming her. He paused when the deputy approached, swiping his tongue over his muzzle.

"Yes?" Shimmerstar rested her tail around him and looked up at the deputy.

Frostedcloud dipped his head. "Sorry to interrupt. The fresh kill pile is running low. I'd like to take out an extra patrol, if that's alright with you?" The clan leader didn't respond. "Shimmerstar?"

"Hmm? Yes, of course." She nodded quickly. "Go ahead, Frostedcloud. We'll need to stock up before the river freezes over."

When the deputy turned away, Salmonstripe looked at her, his green eyes filled with concern. "Are you alright?"

Shimmerstar sighed and rested her chin on her paws. "Otterpelt's omen has struck fear into the clan," She murmured. "I must admit it's on my mind too. Something must be done."

The reddish tabby shifted close to her and rested his chin on her

head. "Don't worry. RiverClan will be safe."

"How do you know?" The silver she-cat closed her eyes.

"Because you're our leader." His eyes gleamed.

She glanced at him and a purr rumbled in her throat as she nuzzled him. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Salmonstripe."

Iceslide snapped his attention away from the romantic pair and looked around. No cat was paying attention to him. *Finally!* He quickly slid through the reeds and bounded across the stepping stones, relieved to be out of the confinement of the camp.

***

It was sunhigh when he reached twolegplace. He crouched and leaped onto a fence, quickly steadying himself. RiverClan cats weren't taught to climb. Truffle and other kittypets he knew had taught him how to master this skill. The first time he'd tried many moons ago, he'd missed the fence completely and fell onto the other side. Kittypets laughed at him about it for over a moon.

"He says he can swim, but I didn't think clan cats could fly too!" One cat had laughed his head off.

Iceslide jumped down into the backyard and looked around. His friends liked hanging out on what they called a "patio". It had a strange clear rock with a stick upright in the center. That was called a "table", and it was made of something called "glass". It reminded him of the hard sheet of ice that froze over the river in leaf-bare. It held up some sort of giant leaf. It reminded him of some odd looking tree, or a mushroom. Around it stood strange things twolegs liked to sit on. They were called "lawn-chairs" They'd looked uncomfortable and flimsy, but when he'd lain on one, he was surprised at how good it felt. On a sunny day, the lawn-chair was warm underneath him. He was disappointed to find that no cat was here at the moment. *Parrot is usually here...*

It was getting colder now, so the chair wouldn't be warm. The leaves on the trees were turning gold and yellow. Leaf-bare was

coming. Despite this, Iceslide went to the patio and leaped onto a bright teal lawn-chair, turning and settling on his belly before resting his chin on his paws. The material was cool under his pads, but he didn't mind. *I guess I'll wait here.* He thought and closed his eyes.

"Iceslide!"

Not a moment later, a paw jabbed him in the shoulder and he nearly had a heart attack. He snapped open his eyes and scrambled to his paws, instinctively unsheathing his claws and digging them into the chair. "What the-"

A tortoiseshell tom crouched on the glass table beside him, green eyes gleaming with amusement. A rainbow collar clung to his neck, fake and vibrantly colored feathers hanging from his tag. "Haha! I scared you, didn't I?" He purred, his fluffy tail waving. "I thought a warrior was always ready for an attack?"

"For Starclan's sake, Parrot!" Iceslide sighed, his tail curling up in amusement. "Where were you?"

"Inside." The tom leaped down from the table and purred. "I was looking out the window. When I saw you, I scratched at the door so my housefolk would let me out. Then!" He suddenly dropped into a sloppy hunting crouch. "I crept to the backyard as quietly as I could!"

Iceslide purred in amusement. "I never heard you coming!"

"I know." Parrot purred and waved his tail. "Come on, I think everyone's at Juicy's house today." A "house" was a giant den for twolegs that they shared with the kittypets. "Let's go!" He padded away, his tail high in the air. Iceslide leaped down from the lawn-chair and followed him, eager to catch up with his friends. He hadn't seen them in moons.

"How's Waterclan?" Parrot asked as they headed around the side of the house.

Iceslide snorted. "*River*Clan." He corrected. "And it's fine, I guess...

How are you?"

The tortoiseshell tom purred. "Great! My housefolk got me a new toy." He paused, looking over his shoulder at his home. "Want to see?"

"Maybe later." Iceslide replied. He wasn't very interested in these fake mice and balls of yarn. *It's much funner to catch real prey!*

"Okay." Parrot paused when they reached the road, looking both ways before crossing. "Guess what I had for lunch?"

Iceslide hurried after his companion. "What?"

"Turkey!" The kittypet exclaimed excitedly as they reached the other side. "It was so good! Have you tried any?" When Iceslide shook his head, he went on eagerly. "You should!"

As much as he enjoyed Parrot's company, the young tom was more hyper than a squirrel in new-leaf. He drove Iceslide crazy sometimes, chattering constantly like the bizarre bird he was named after. He'd described the strange bird, covered with red, blue, and green feathers. Iceslide had never seen such a strange creature and was still unsure of it's existence. Knowing Parrot, the crazy kittypet made it up to fool a dumb clan cat.

They crossed a few backyards until they reached Juicy's. This yard didn't have a patio, but a couple chairs on a stone slab. Sure enough, his friends were settled there. A fat orange and white tom lay on his back on one of the chairs, his eyes closed and a content look on his face. A ginger tabby she-cat lay curled up on the other chair, her tail tucked over her pink nose. Under the chair lay a tortoiseshell she-cat. Closest to the wall was a small silver spotted tom who looked nervous.

"Hey, Juicy!" Parrot called, bounding over to them. "Look who I found!"

The plump orange and white kittypet grunted as he rolled over onto his belly and blinked at Iceslide. "Hey! Long time no see." He purred.

"Iceslide!" The tortoiseshell and white she-cat's ears perked and she got to her paws, trotting over to him. Her purple collar jingled with each step. "It's good to see you!" She bumped her head against Iceslide's, and he purred, looking into her glowing blue eyes. *I forgot how pretty Violet was.*

"I couldn't stay away," Iceslide purred as the other two cats approached him. "Hi Princess," He meowed to the ginger tabby she-cat.

She purred a greeting. "How are you, dear?"

"Hey, Iceslide." The undersized silver speckled tom looked up at him, his pale green eyes warm.

He purred. "Dime! You look well." Unlike the other cats, the small tom wasn't a kittypet. He was a loner, cast away from his family for being the runt of his litter. He was as old as Iceslide and still only the size of an apprentice. He didn't want to give up his freedom to become a kittypet. Instead he hunted around twolegplace.

"Thanks," Dime dipped his head. "So do you."

"Iceslide, I saved you some tuna, but, uh..." Juicy looked away, his whiskers drooping. "I ate it."

He let out a purr of amusement. "I can't say I'm surprised!"

Violet nudged Iceslide. "So, tell us what you've been up to!"

He looked down, his pelt burning at how close she was to him. "Err not much. I've been hunting and fishing." They continued talking for a long while. He knew a warrior shouldn't be in a backyard hanging out with kittypets. But he'd grown quite fond of these cats. At this point, they knew him better than his own clanmates did, and he felt more comfortable with them. Parrot was fun and full of energy. Juicy was kind. And Violet, well... She certainly was a lot. He wondered why the warrior code told the clans to despise kittypets. *They're just ordinary cats like anyone else! What's the harm in having friends?*

Sunset was nearing and Iceslide reluctantly left his kittypet friends,

promising to return when he could. He'd nearly reached the camp when he heard Shimmerstar's meow ringing across the clearing. "Maplesky has something to say."

There's a clan meeting going on. Iceslide realized and crouched behind the reeds, peering out. *I'd better wait until it's over, or some cat will notice me sneak in.* Shimmerstar sat on the tree stump. Frostedcloud, Maplesky, and Otterpelt stood below.

"I know you've all been worried about Otterpelt's dream," Maplesky began, his yellow eyes fixed on his clanmates. "As I said before, even medicine cats have regular dreams sometimes-"

"That's fish-brained!" Ravenfeather interrupted, his amber eyes narrowed. "A river of blood? Cat skulls? That sounds like an omen to me!"

Beside him, Winterlight touched his flank with her tail. "Let him speak." She murmured. The black warrior slowly relaxed and leaned on her.

The medicine cat blinked gratefully at her and continued. "StarClan seemed to want to reassure you all. Last night I dreamed of the river flowing with fish, the sky bright and warm, and RiverClan thriving with new kits." Behind him, Otterpelt was silent, her gaze fixed on her paws.

The clan broke into murmuring. Some cats sounded relieved, while others were still unsure.

"How do you know it wasn't one of your "ordinary dreams"?" Troutspots called out.

"My old mentor spoke to me," Maplesky meowed. "It was a message straight from StarClan." When the clan didn't respond, the light brown tom raised his head. "There is nothing to fear. RiverClan will thrive."

Dipfoot let out a soft sigh. "Thank StarClan."

"See?" Shorestep nudged her apprentice. "I told you."

As the clan dispersed, Shimmerstar leaped down from the stump, flicking her tail for the medicine cats to follow her. Iceslide froze when they headed straight for him. *Oh no!* He shrank back until he was concealed in the reeds, pressing himself to the ground. *Please don't see me or scent me!*

The three cats leaned close together on the other side of the reeds. "Well done, Maplesky." Shimmerstar whispered.

The medicine cat sighed. "I don't like lying about StarClan." *Lying?* Iceslide's eyes widened.

"We should have told the truth!" Otterpelt hissed, her amber eyes filled with distress. "We need to warn them!"

Shimmerstar rested her tail on the she-cat's shoulder. "The clan was afraid, Otterpelt. Whatever our destiny is, we must face it without fear."

Maplesky touched his nose to Otterpelt's ear. "I'm sorry. Shimmerstar is right. We can't spread panic." He paused. "I've told you before not to tell the clan your omens until you know what they mean."

The reddish brown she-cat looked down. "This one seemed important."

"It is." Shimmerstar agreed. "Which is why we must handle it carefully before spreading panic. Perhaps you'll have more dreams to make their message clearer."

"I suppose." Otterpelt mumbled.

The three cats turned away. Iceslide waited until they were too far away to hear him and stepped out of his hiding place, hardly believing what he'd heard. *They're lying to the clan! We really are in danger...*

Chapter 4

[image]

Iceslide bounced across the stepping stones, relieved after his close encounter with Shimmerstar and the medicine cats. When he reached the riverbank, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure no cat had seen him spying. *That was close! They could have seen-* He stumbled into fur.

"Iceslide?"

Aah! He stepped back quickly, finding himself face to face with Shimmerstar. "Oh- Hi!"

The silver she-cat twitched her tail, her green eyes fixed on him. "Where have you been?"

"H-hunting." Iceslide replied, his heart pounding. *Does she know I heard her talking to the medicine cats?*

"Is that right?" Shimmerstar tilted her head. "I don't recall Frostedcloud putting you on a patrol today. And I don't see any prey with you."

Iceslide hesitated. "I went on my own, and-"

"As usual."

"-And I buried it near the clearing." He finished, hoping she'd believe him. "I can go fetch it now if you'd like." He offered, then bit his tongue a second later. *Fox dung! I haven't caught anything to show her, mouse-brain!*

The RiverClan leader remained unimpressed. She let out a sigh and

closed her eyes. "You've been away from camp all day, and you return empty pawed." She growled. "It's unacceptable." She raised her head. "You're going to catch prey for your clanmates. I'd like you to go fishing."

"But it's almost dusk," Iceslide exclaimed, his body tensing in protest. He was exhausted from the walk to and from twolegplace. "Surely I should rest-"

"No!" Shimmerstar snapped. "You're going fishing, and that's an order. And I suppose I'd better send another warrior with you to make sure you do as you're told."

"I'll go with him." Beyond her, Lilynose seemed to have been watching them. She hurried over, waving her tortoiseshell tail. Shimmerstar nodded to the young she-cat thankfully.

I don't need to be watched! Iceslide's stomach churned with frustration. "But-"

"This is your last chance. Is that clear?" The Riverclan leader growled, narrowing her eyes.

Iceslide dropped his gaze, flicking his tail. *Last chance...? Or what..?* But he didn't ask. "Yes, Shimmerstar." He muttered reluctantly.

She watched him for a moment longer before turning to Lilynose. "I expect you'll return before nightfall." She meowed. "Make sure he catches something." As she turned and padded away, Lilynose looked to Iceslide. "Are you ready?"

"Sure." He sighed and turned away. Lilynose followed him happily.

When they reached the river, Iceslide let out a sigh, his paws aching. He wanted to plop down onto the grass and relax. But if he didn't bring one stinking fish back to camp, Shimmerstar was sure to claw his ear off.

"Are you okay?" Lilynose looked at him, sounding worried. "You look tired."

That's because I am tired! Iceslide wanted to growl. "Yeah, yeah." He padded closer to the riverside and crouched, peering into the rippling water. "The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can go rest."

"Have you had a busy day?" She asked curiously. "I don't see you much. Where have you been?"

Iceslide twitched his ear. "Let's just catch some fish, okay?"

"Okay." The tortoiseshell splashed she-cat meowed quietly and crouched beside him. Iceslide felt her gaze on him. He grew uncomfortable and pretended not to notice, trying to focus on spotting a fish. A shadow flashed below the surface and he shot a paw into the water, but the fish slipped away before he could grasp it in his claws.

"Fox dung!" He exclaimed. *I haven't done this in at least a moon.* He realized.

Beside him, Lilynose purred, her eyes gleaming with amusement. "Someone's a little rusty! You were casting a shadow on the water."

"Right, I knew that." Iceslide flattened his ears in embarrassment. *That's the first thing an apprentice learns!* "Err my paws are sore, that's all." *It wasn't completely a lie.*

Her eyes flashed with sympathy. "I'm sorry. Why don't you dip your paws in the water? It might help."

Iceslide hesitantly shifted forward and let his front paws dangle into the river. He tensed when they first broke the surface, then relaxed. "That does feel nice." He purred.

"Told you." Lilynose waved her tail. "Why don't you stay like that and rest?" She suggested. "I'll do the fishing."

He shook his head. "I'm supposed to catch something."

"And you will. At least, that's what we'll tell Shimmerstar." Her green eyes gleamed. "I won't tell if you don't."

Iceslide blinked at her in surprise. "You'd do that for me?"

"Of course," Lilynose dipped her head, hesitating before adding, "I'd do anything for you."

Huh, well that's great! I can just relax now. "Thanks, Lilynose," He purred and got more comfortable, resting his chin on the grass. He began wondering if she considered him a friend. Before now, Iceslide found her annoying, always talking to him and trying to pry information out of him. But maybe she wasn't so bad. He closed his eyes and listened to the soft roar of the river below him.

***

"Iceslide." A paw gently prodded him and he jumped a little, blinking awake. He was still by the edge of the river, his paws in the water. Lilynose stood over him, her eyes warm. "You fell asleep." Beyond her, the sky was darker than it had been before, a mixture of pink and purple.

He got up and pulled his paws out of the water. He shivered as the cool air touched them. His fur was soaked halfway up his front legs, plastered to his skin. His paws didn't ache, but he was freezing. "C-can we go back to camp?" He asked as he shivered.

Lilynose nodded, flicking her tail behind her to a small pile of four fish. "I caught enough! We'll say we each caught two, okay?"

"O-okay." Iceslide shuddered. "Thanks again."

"Anytime." She purred, looking hesitant. "We should hang out more often."

Oh no. He silently groaned. *That means less time I can spend with my friends! I don't want to have to go fishing here all the time!* "Err... Maybe." He picked up two fish by their tails.

Lilynose must have heard the lack of enthusiasm in his voice, because her tail drooped. "I mean, yeah..." She quickly picked up the other two fish, and they headed back to camp.

***

They returned to camp and deposited the fish on the fresh kill pile. Shimmerstar was near her den speaking to Frostedcloud. When she saw them, she said something to the deputy before padding over. "Well done." She meowed and looked at Lilynose. "How many did he catch?"

"We each caught two." Lilynose meowed. He was grateful for her lie.

Shimmerstar's gaze rested on Iceslide, and he grew nervous. "Very good," She meowed approvingly. "You both deserve to rest now." She nodded.

Iceslide dipped his head and Lilynose hesitated as the Riverclan leader turned away, glancing at him warmly. "See you." She padded away to the warriors den.

I'm so tired. Iceslide began to follow her.

"Iceslide!"

He stopped and let out a sigh. *Please, I just want to sleep!* He turned his head and saw Grayshadow and Whitedapple settled by the reeds sharing a trout, watching him. "Come join us!" His mother called.

He reluctantly padded over and forced a purr. "What is it?"

"Do we need a reason to see our son?" Grayshadow asked, his gray tail twitching. "We hardly see you anymore."

"That's right." His mother added. "You're never in the camp."

Iceslide's tail twitched back and forth awkwardly. "I'm busy, a lot..."

"With what?" His father asked. "Frostedcloud never sends you on patrols." He paused, yellow eyes shining. "Winterlight is on two or three patrols every day."

Whitedapple purred. "She's such a good hunter."

Grayshadow nodded. "Yes." He cast Iceslide a glance. "Why can't you be more like your sister?" Whitedapple gently batted him over

the ear. "Hey!"

"Don't say that," Whitedapple scolded and looked at Iceslide. "We're very proud of you, dear."

Right... Iceslide let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, I'm really tired..."

His mother's eyes lit with sympathy. "Of course, go to sleep."

As he turned away, he heard his father whisper, "What could he be tired from? He does nothing!"

That's not true. He thought, lashing his tail as he entered the warriors den, stepping over his sleeping clanmates. *I do things. Maybe you wouldn't approve of it, but it's my choice. I'm living a life of adventure while you lounge around by the river.* He sighed and curled up in his nest, beginning to lap his tongue at his wet paws. *That's how I choose to live, and nothing will change that.*

Chapter 5

[image]

Iceslide lay near the warriors den, grooming himself. The sun was setting, tinting the camp in a golden hue. Most cats were relaxing at this time. His old mentor, Frozenripple, was stretched outside the nursery with his mate, Petalfin. Both cats purred loudly, and the tom wrapped his fluffy silver and white tail around her. Iceslide noticed how large her stomach had gotten. *She's expecting his kits.* He remembered overhearing some cat say it. *It can't be long now until they're born.*

Lilynose was play fighting with her brother, and Iceslide was almost relieved that she wasn't over here bothering him. *She's nice and all, but I like being alone.* She pounced on Creekleap's back and pinned him, letting out a purr. "Got you!"

The golden tabby tom growled playfully and grunted as he rolled over, pushing her off. "Not yet, you don't!" He laughed and batted her ear softly. Lilynose laughed and sprang at him, then started poking at his exposed belly with her small paws.

"Hey!" Creekleap yelped and struggled to free himself. "That tickles!"

"Lilynose! Creekleap!"

The siblings froze and leaped apart. Shimmerstar padded toward them, her eyes stern but warm. "Are you warriors or kits?" She asked.

Creekleap straightened, puffing out his pale chest. "*I'm* a warrior!"

He exclaimed, shooting his sister a glance. "I don't know about *her* though." Lilynose stuck her tongue out at him.

"Our kits are the best warriors in the clan." Salmonstripe padded up beside Shimmerstar, his eyes warm as he looked at the two warriors. "Wouldn't you say so?"

Shimmerstar let out a purr. "You know as leader, I can't favorite any warriors." She paused, glancing around to make sure no other cat was near. "But if I had to choose, it would be you three." She purred. Salmonstripe pushed his muzzle into her fur while Creekleap and Lilynose purred at their mother.

Movement at the side of the clearing caught Iceslide's eye. He paused mid-lick and saw Frostedcloud heading for the center of the clearing. "It's time to send out the last patrols for the day," He announced, raising his voice so that every cat could hear him. "Would anyone like to go hunting?"

Salmonstripe looked over his shoulder from where he sat with Shimmerstar and his kits. "I'll go," He offered, padding over to the deputy. "I can take Heronpaw too." He looked to the apprentice's den. "Heronpaw!"

The young gray tom poked his head out of the apprentice's den, his amber eyes flashing eagerly. "Did someone say 'hunting patrol'? I'm coming!" He shot out of the den to his mentor and Iceslide couldn't hide his amusement. The apprentice had unusually long legs that proved to be very beneficial for hunting. Not only could he run faster and cover more ground than most RiverClan cats, but he could reach further into the river to catch fish. Though this led him to boast and be overconfident in his abilities, no warrior could deny the fact that Heronpaw was a great asset to the clan and would make a fine warrior one day.

Frostedcloud chuckled. "Of course, Heronpaw." He scanned the clearing. "Mudslip, Shallowpool, you can join them."

"Sure!" Mudslip stretched out from where he'd been sitting by the nursery, arching his brown back. "My paws are itching to get out of camp." Iceslide remembered that Vixenwhisper was in the nursery

with his kits. Mudslip had been allowed breaks from his warrior duties to spend time with Vixenwhisper and his kits.

As Frostedcloud carried on organizing patrols, Iceslide continued lapping at his sleek white fur, cleaning bits of leaves and dirt from it. *Thank StarClan I'll have a nice quiet evening here.* He thought. *Actually, maybe I'll go visit Parrot and Violet? Yeah! That's what I'll-*

"-And Iceslide."

His ears flicked forward when his name was called and he looked up to see Frostedcloud's stare fixed on him. Salmonstripe was leading his patrol out of camp, and a new group of warriors stood by the clan deputy, looking at Iceslide expectantly.

"Huh?" He blinked.

The white tom twitched his tail. "I asked you to join Troutspot's patrol." The silver spotted warrior looked at Iceslide, flanked by Lakesong, Creekleap, and Perchstripe.

"O-oh, sure." Iceslide reluctantly straightened and joined the other warriors, suppressing a growl of annoyance. *There goes visiting twolegplace!*

Frostedcloud looked at Iceslide for a moment, his eyes narrowing. "A warrior should be expected to be called on patrols." He commented. Before Iceslide could think of a response, he turned to the others. "I suggest you take advantage of the river before it freezes over. Good hunting." He dipped his head and padded away.

"Right," Troutspots turned to his patrol. "Let's go."

***

Iceslide padded alongside the river, the tip of his tail twitching in annoyance. *Stupid Frostedcloud, putting me on patrols! I could have spent the evening hanging out with Juicy, Parrot, Dime, Princess, and... Violet...* His frustration vanished as he started daydreaming about the beautiful tortoiseshell kittypet. *She's a great cat...* Suddenly his paws itched even more so to get to twolegplace to see her. *I could stay there all day.*

He paused and looked over his shoulder, raising a front paw slightly. Troutspots had his back to him from where he crouched, seeming focused on the river. Creekleap and Perchstripe were on the other side of the river, arguing.

"Look at the size of it!" Creekleap boasted, showing off the plump trout he held in his claws.

Perchstripe rolled his eyes. "That's nothing!" He dropped into a crouch, his tail swishing back and forth as he stared into the depths of the river. "I'll catch something bigger than that!"

Beyond them, Lakesong had shot a white paw into the water, sending a fish flying onto the shore. It flapped on the ground in panic before she delivered the killing bite.

Hmmm... He hesitated before calling out to them. "I'm going to try further down the river!" When no cat responded, he huffed out a sigh. "Okay, Iceslide, go ahead!" He mumbled to himself. *And Shimmerstar wonders why I'm away from camp so much. No cat notices me! But I'm glad.* He let out an excited purr and bounded away. *They can't say I didn't tell them I was leaving.*

***

It was getting dark by the time he reached the edge of the forest near Skyclan territory. He padded alongside the fence that marked the border between the world of a kittypet and the world of a warrior. Truffle lived around here. He finally came across a section of the fence where a piece of wood was missing and slipped through the hole. He looked around Truffle's yard and quickly spotted the cream kittypet dozing on a wooden table. Iceslide's heart quickened with excitement at the thought of sneaking up on him. He was always up for a good laugh. He crouched and started toward Truffle.

Suddenly, pressure slammed into his back and Iceslide let out a startled yowl as strong paws pinned his small shoulders. He grunted and summoned all his strength to push upward and roll over to face his attacker. He was surprised to find himself looking at a familiar yellow face, eyes gleaming. "Caught you off guard, didn't I?" He

chuckled.

"Sulfur!" Iceslide exclaimed and pushed the rogue off of him, unable to hide his amusement. "You mouse-brain!" He scrambled to his paws.

"What the-" Truffle stared down at them from the table blinking away sleep, no doubt awoken by Iceslide's yowl. "What are you doing?" He snorted. "I was trying to sleep!"

Sulfur nudged Iceslide. "He was going to scare you."

"Was not!" Iceslide exclaimed, chuckling.

"Oh, sure." Truffle huffed, his yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. "You wild cats have nothing better to do than scare helpless kittypets." He meowed innocently, lifting a hind leg to scratch behind his blue collar.

Iceslide laughed. "You're not so helpless. You're a warrior, remember Trufflebutt?" The kittypet scowled and turned his tail to him, and they chuckled. *This is why I love hanging out with these cats! They know how to have fun. Back in Riverclan it's all work and the warrior code.*

After a while they calmed down. Truffle yawned and arched his back. "What brings you here, Iceslide?"

"I just wanted to hang out." Iceslide replied. "What are you up to?"

Truffle hesitated, looking up at the darkening sky. "You're kind of late. My housefolk will lock me inside for the night soon." His tail drooped. "Sorry. You and Sulfur could go do something though."

Iceslide hesitated. "Are you sure?" He felt bad going to have fun without him.

"Yeah, go-" The kittypet broke off, his ears flicking back. Iceslide froze when he heard a female twoleg yowl from the side of the house. He instinctively backed away to the shelter of a bush to ensure he would be hidden if the twoleg decided to come. There were a lot of things he enjoyed about life outside the clans, but

twolegs weren't one of them. They were huge, strange looking creatures, and he couldn't understand how any cat could be fond of them, sleep beside them, let them pick you up and touch you... It made him shudder just thinking about it.

"I've gotta go!" Truffle spun and ran off around the side of the house. "Bye guys!" A few moments later he heard the twoleg say something, sounding happy, just before the door closed.

"And then there were two." Sulfur looked at Iceslide, his eyes lighting with amusement. "What are you doing?"

Iceslide cautiously crept out from under the bush. "I don't like twolegs."

"Me neither." The yellow tom meowed. "But this one's only interested in Truffle, not us. Nothing to worry about." He twitched his tail. "Want to go hunting? I haven't had dinner yet."

"Sounds great!" Iceslide purred.

***

Night had fallen over the forest. It was chilly and the ground was littered with dry, broken leaves from the bare trees above. Sulfur padded ahead of him, the leaves crunching under his paws. They had already caught a couple mice to snack on before they continued hunting. Now they were looking for more.

"Do you still live on your own?" Iceslide asked for the sake of conversation. Sulfur had told him a lot about himself in the past. His earliest memory was being abandoned as a kit at the side of a thunderpath. He would have died if he hadn't been taken in by a couple kind farm cats and nursed back to health. Iceslide didn't know what happened after that, only that Sulfur lived alone now in an abandoned twoleg shack outside of Thunderclan territory.

Sulfur nodded, his whiskers twitching as he searched for prey.

"Do you get lonely?" Iceslide asked curiously. He sometimes considered leaving Riverclan to become a rogue. Then he could go and do as he pleased without having to worry about getting caught.

But he would miss his kin.

The creamy yellow tom hesitated. "Sometimes." He admitted, looking back at Iceslide with a gleam in his eye. "But I've got you and Truffle to keep me company. I run into other cats too sometimes." He paused, his ears twitching.

Iceslide stopped and watched the rogue drop into a hunting crouch, slowly moving forward over the leaves. He pounced, rustling the leaves around him, but despite the messy pounce, he landed square on the mouse and bit its neck. "Good catch!" He called. Sulfur blinked back at him gratefully.

Out of the corner of his eye something moved in the shadows of an oak tree, and Iceslide snapped his attention to it. A vole scurried along the roots. He narrowed his eyes. *I bet I can catch that...* He crouched and started toward it.

-snap-

A twig snapped under his paw and the vole darted. *No you don't!* Iceslide gave chase, pelting through the grass after the rodent. He panted as he leaped around trees and bushes and eventually caught up to it. He pounced and grasped the vole in his claws. It squeaked and struggled, but Iceslide quickly lunged down and sunk his teeth into it's neck, feeling the tiny creature go limp. He lifted his head and sighed, his heart racing from the pursuit.

"Not bad for a clan cat." Sulfur padded up behind him, looking amused. "I guess you're better at catching prey that swims."

Iceslide flattened his ears with embarrassment. "Well, yeah." He admitted. He wasn't going to tell him that most Riverclan cats could have caught that vole without such a struggle. He'd always been so curious and distracted by the world outside the clans, he hadn't paid much attention to his training. It was a miracle he'd passed his assessment. He certainly wasn't the best hunter or fighter in the forest.

"Hey, don't feel bad." Sulfur waved his thick tail. "I've no idea how to catch a fish. Maybe you can show me sometime, fisherman cat."

He chuckled.

Iceslide laughed at this, and they continued to joke and chat between catches throughout the night. After a while, he became aware of the sky lightening. He froze. *Great StarClan, it can't be dawn already! Have I been out all night?* "Woah!"

Sulfur blinked at him from where he crouched, stalking a squirrel. "Wha- Oh!" He understood. "You'd better go home."

"See you around." Iceslide hurried back through the forest.

***

By the time he reached RiverClan territory, the exhaustion was kicking in. He'd been having so much fun with Sulfur he'd lost track of time, and had clearly been distracted from tiredness. His paws ached with each step and his muscles felt stiff and sore. He grew nervous when he reached the camp. *Surely the patrol realized I left?* To his relief, the clearing was nearly empty. It wasn't daylight yet and most cats were still asleep. He saw Lakesong, Lilynose, Heartpaw, and Finpaw outside of the nursery, looking inside curiously.

Thank StarClan! No cat will see me. Iceslide drew in a deep breath and padded into the camp.

Lilynose must have heard him, because she turned, her green eyes brightening when she saw him. "Iceslide!" *Oh no!* She raced over to him and Iceslide wanted to shrink back, silently begging her to be quiet. *Please don't give me away!* He tried to look alert, hoping he didn't look as tired as he felt. "Where have you been?" Before he could come up with an excuse, she went on, looking excited. "Guess what? Petalfin kitted last night!"

"That's great," Iceslide meowed dryly, unable to hide the exhaustion in his voice, but she didn't seem to notice.

"They're so cute!" She purred, her skinny tail waving excitedly. "Come see them! They're your mentor, Frozenripple's kits after all."

So? The last thing he wanted to do was go into the nursery to stare

at wailing fluffballs. *I need to sleep! Please let me sleep!* But Lilynose was already bouncing back toward the nursery, and Iceslide felt that he had no choice but to follow her.

As they neared the den, Lakesong purred a greeting, and Iceslide remembered that she was Frozenripple's sister. These kits were her kin. Thankfully she seemed to have forgotten about his disappearance on patrol yesterday due to the arrival of her brother's second litter.

Two of Frozenripple and Petalfin's other kits, Heartpaw and Finpaw, looked excited about their new siblings. "I can't wait to tell Heronpaw when he wakes up!" Heartpaw purred. "Do you think we'll get to mentor them? We'll be warriors by then!"

"I wish!" Finpaw meowed hopefully.

Lilynose ducked into the nursery, and Iceslide hesitantly followed. The warm scent of milk and kit fluff filled his lungs, and memories of kithood came flooding back to him. He remembered playfighting with Winterkit and Blizzardkit, arguing about who would be the best warriors, playing games with stones and pebbles that Grayshadow brought them, and curling up against Whitedapple's warm fur every night.

Vixenwhisper was curled up at the opposite side of the nursery with her three kits, trying to keep them away from the newborns. Warmkit stared wide eyed at them. "They're so tiny!"

"When can we play with them?" Newtkit asked. "It'll be nice having new friends."

"When they're bigger." Vixenwhisper rasped her tongue over Newtkit's head. "For now they need rest." She blinked warmly at Iceslide and Lilynose.

Petalfin was laying on her side, watching her kits suckle. They were tiny bundles of fluff just as Iceslide imagined. Frozenripple lay curled around her as she pressed into his fluffy silver and white pelt, purring loudly. Petalfin drifted her blue eyes to the visitors and purred. "Iceslide, good to see you."

I'm supposed to say something. Iceslide froze. *What do I say?* "Uh... Those are... kits... Good kits." He stammered. *Fox dung.* Frozenripple and Petalfin exchanged an amused look, and Lilynose purred in amusement

"You're so funny," She laughed softly and pointed to the silver and white kit. "Look, that one's a she-cat. They named her Willowkit!"

Great.

"And the black tom is Darkkit!"

Because he's dark.

"And the little tabby and white one is a tom too, named Mintkit!"

How minty.

"Aren't they adorable?" Lilynose purred, gazing down at the kits fondly. "I'd like to have kits someday." She glanced at Iceslide, clearly waiting for him to share his plans for the future. *I don't have time for kits! They're just little whiny balls of fur! And they'd just keep me even more trapped in Riverclan.* But clearly Lilynose felt differently, so he didn't dare admit he disliked kits. *I want to be free to go wherever I want without having responsibilities.*

Allegiance Update #2

River C lan

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Apprentice, Heronpaw

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Heartpaw

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Finpaw

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Lilynose - White she-cat with pale tortoiseshell splashes, pale green eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Heartpaw - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Heronpaw - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Finpaw - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Queens

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes. Mother to Mudslip's kits:

Newtkit - Thin black and brown tabby tom with a red striped tail, amber eyes.

Warmkit - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckkit - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes. Mother to Frozenripple's kits:

Willowkit - Silver and white she-cat with blue eyes.

Darkkit - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintkit - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Elders

Dewwhisker - Gray and white tom with black spots, blue eyes.

Shadepath - Dark gray she-cat with a striped tail and white muzzle, dark green eyes.

Shadow Cl an

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sparrowflight - brown and ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Apprentice, Cougarpaw

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cliffpaw

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentices

Cougarpaw - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffpaw - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Maplepaw - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosepaw - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkpaw - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Queens

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Buzzardglare's kits:

Poppykit - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Cobrakit - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Carrottail's kits.

Elders

Vulturewing - Big black and dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Twigleaf - Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Thunder C lan

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

Wind C lan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Sk yCl an

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep

green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 6

[image]

A full moon hung in the sky, lighting the way to fourtrees. Iceslide followed his clanmates through RiverClan territory, leaves crunching under their paws as they went. He felt his paws tingle with excitement. *I wonder what's new in the other clans? I haven't talked to Firetail and Soakedears in a while. Did Redblaze have her kits? I'll have to ask Baconstripe. Is Tigerpaw a warrior yet?*

Iceslide had many friends in other clans. More than he did in RiverClan. He enjoyed talking to them and learning about what their lives were like in their clans. He imagined it was far different than in RiverClan.

When they reached fourtrees, he saw that many cats were already gathered there waiting. Two leaders stood on the great rock. Whitestar, the leader of SkyClan, looked down at her clan, her white fur glowing in the night. Beside her, Birchstar of ThunderClan sat neatly with his light brown tabby tail over his white paws.

Iceslide recognized the deputies and medicine cats as well. Strawberryspots, the deputy of ThunderClan, was sitting at the base of the rock, her amber eyes narrowed as she studied the cats around her. Whitestar's deputy, Raventuft, wasn't far from the spotted she-cat, looking awkward. Iceslide couldn't help but purr in amusement. *From what I've heard, Strawberryspots isn't the friendliest cat. Even among her clan, she's bossy and has a tongue as sharp as a thorn!* On the other side of the great rock, the medicine cats were being more social. Junglefoot and Ryepaw of SkyClan were deep in conversation with Flowerwing of ThunderClan.

Shimmerstar waved her dappled tail and headed for the great rock to join the other leaders. She leapt up beside them, and Whitestar dipped her head while Birchstar began speaking with her. Frostedcloud went to the other deputies and sat near Strawberryspots, who shot the white tom a glare.

Iceslide turned away to study the crowd as Maplesky and Otterpelt joined the other medicine cats. He recognized Whiskerface, Birdsong, and Broadwing of ThunderClan. A small white tom with tufted ear tips sat near Broadwing, looking around curiously. Deciding to talk to them, Iceslide padded over to the group, purring a greeting. "Hello!"

The ThunderClan cats looked at him, and Whiskerface waved his tail in greeting. "Iceslide, good to see you! How's the prey running in RiverClan?"

"Or should you say, 'how's it swimming'?" Birdsong purred, her yellow eyes gleaming. Beside her, Broadwing dipped his big head.

"It's swimming fast," Iceslide chuckled and sat down, turning his head to the small white cat. "Who's this?"

Broadwing nodded to the cat. "This is my new apprentice, Snowpaw."

"Hello." Snowpaw dipped his head, his nose twitching as he picked up Iceslide's scent. "You're a RiverClan cat, aren't you?"

Iceslide nodded, impressed at his skills. *It took me a while to learn the other clan's scents! But then again, I was too busy sniffing other things.* "That's right. I'm Iceslide." He noticed that though he was just an apprentice, muscles rippled under his white pelt. "You look like you're going to be just as strong as your mentor!"

Snowpaw blinked his amber eyes at the praise. "Thanks," He meowed. "I hope so!"

"Hey, look," Birdsong meowed, looking over her shoulder. "WindClan has arrived." Iceslide followed her gaze toward the moor.

Gladestar was leading her clan into the clearing, her golden pelt dark in the night. She had only been leader since last green-leaf. She was flanked by her deputy, Monarchwing, a younger orange and black spotted she-cat. As the clan continued into the clearing and broke into smaller groups, he saw the medicine cats, Hivepelt

and Silverberry, head toward the great rock. The medicine cats looked at them warmly, and Junglefoot purred a greeting, stepping forward to bump heads with Hivepelt, while Silverberry and Otterpelt began speaking to each other happily.

It must be nice to be a medicine cat. Iceslide thought. *You can be friends with cats from other clans, and it's not a problem! If only it didn't come with responsibilities and having to learn about herbs. Yuck!*

Iceslide caught sight of Firetail's orange fur and nodded to the ThunderClan cats. "It was nice seeing you. Take care!" They said their goodbyes, and he hurried through the crowd toward his WindClan friends. "Hey, Firetail!"

As he got closer, he noticed Soakedears standing beside him. Firetail turned at Iceslide's call, his ears perking up. "Iceslide!" He stepped forward to meet him and they bumped heads, purring. "It's been a while!"

"I've been busy," Iceslide purred and nudged Soakedears playfully. "How's the prey running?"

The dark warrior purred. "Great!"

"What have you two been up to?" Iceslide prompted, curling his tail over his paws.

Soakedear's green eyes lit up. "Oh, lots! Last moon, me and Firetail found a tunnel with tons of rabbits in it!"

"Yeah," Firetail hissed at his friend in a lower tone. "And no one else knows about it, so keep it down!"

Iceslide chuckled. "Why so secretive?"

"We always bring back the most prey." Firetail's eyes gleamed. "We want Gladestar to think we're the best hunters in the clan." He glanced over his shoulder where Monarchwing sat at the base of the great rock. "With my sister as deputy, I've got to do something to get noticed."

"No one knows we actually have a secret source of rabbits,"

Soakedears added slyly.

Iceslide was impressed by how clever they were. "That's great! I need to think of something like that." He cast a glance at the deputies. "Frostedcloud keeps putting me on patrols, and I'm sick of it."

Firetail rolled his eyes. "You poor thing, getting noticed by the deputy." The three of them chuckled.

"At last! There's ShadowClan!" A cat meowed from near Iceslide, and he looked over his shoulder.

A dark gray tabby tom stood at the edge of the clearing, his green eyes glowing. It was Stormstar, the ShadowClan leader. He nodded to his clan, and they made their way through the crowd. He was followed by his deputy, Pinetail, a dark gray and brown tabby she-cat.

"About time!" He heard Strawberryspots scowl as the ShadowClan deputy reached her. "What were you doing, counting frogs?"

Pinetail flicked her green gaze to the ThunderClan deputy. "Perhaps you should be counting the many thorns you so clearly have in your rear." Strawberryspots' jaw dropped, her amber eyes flaring with anger. Pinetail settled and curled her tail neatly over her paws, ignoring Strawberryspots' growl and gazing up at the leaders.

"I can't believe she said that!" Firetail hissed in amusement to Iceslide. "*And* didn't get her fur ripped off!"

Iceslide chuckled. "If any cat's a match for Strawberryspots, it's Pinetail."

Across from the deputies, the ShadowClan medicine cat, Hawkfeather, was settling among the other medicine cats. He was relatively young, and had only become sole medicine cat of ShadowClan a few moons ago when his mentor died.

"Let the gathering begin!" Birchstar meowed as Stormstar settled on the rock beside Gladestar. "The prey is running well in ThunderClan. We have three new apprentices, Snowpaw,

Vanillapaw, and Breezepaw!"

"Snowpaw! Vanillapaw! Breezepaw!" As the clans cheered, Iceslide looked around and saw Snowpaw sitting by Broadwing, puffing out his chest proudly.

Shimmerstar padded forward to speak next. "RiverClan is very well," She announced. "We have plenty of young cats on their way to becoming warriors. We have three new apprentices, Newtpaw, Warmpaw, and Duckpaw!"

The clans began calling out their names, and Iceslide saw the three new apprentices sitting together, their eyes lit with excitement. Their parents, Mudslip and Vixenwhisper, watched proudly from a distance.

"Petalfin has also given birth to Willowkit, Darkkit, and Mintkit." She finished. "That is all that RiverClan has to share." She stepped back and dipped her head as Stormstar took her place at the front of the rock.

"Thank you, Shimmerstar," The gray tabby meowed before looking at the cats below. "ShadowClan also has many apprentices in training and kits in the nursery. Our newest apprentices are Maplepaw, Rosepaw, and Milkpaw."

"Maplepaw! Rosepaw! Milkpaw!" The three young cats looked proud and excited as the clans cheered and congratulated them. Maplepaw was a creamy tabby tom. His yellow eyes shone with pride as he looked around him. His siblings looked just as overjoyed in the moment they'd been waiting for. They all had creamy fur like Redblaze. *Those must be she and Baconstripe's kits.* Iceslide realized.

As the cheering died down, Stormstar went on. "Additionally, Foxshine has given birth to two healthy kits, Poppykit and Cobrakit, and Bluerain is expecting a litter."

As Whitestar began to speak, a paw tapped Iceslide on the back. "Psst!" He blinked and turned to see a familiar orange striped face.

"Carrottail!" Iceslide purred a greeting to the ShadowClan warrior.

"How are you?"

"I'm great!" The warrior purred back. "Did you hear about Bluerain?"

Iceslide nodded. "They're your kits?" He guessed.

"Yup!" His eyes shone with pride. "They'll be great. I'm so excited!"

He couldn't understand how any cat could be so excited about having to deal with kits. But seeing how happy Carrottail was, he didn't dare put in his opinion. "That's great!" He purred. "Congrat-"

"Shh!" A ThunderClan warrior glared at them. "*Some* of us want to hear what the leaders have to say."

Carrottail looked embarrassed. "Sorry." Iceslide rolled his eyes.

Whitestar finished speaking, and Gladestar took her place. "WindClan has little news to share," She meowed. "The prey is running well, and our bellies are full thanks to our skilled warriors." Her gaze rested on Firetail and Soakedears, who straightened proudly.

Iceslide shook his head, his eyes gleaming. *Those tricksters!*

Gladestar stepped back. "That is all I have to say. Does anyone have any other news?" She looked from side to side at the other leaders, who shook their heads. "Then that brings the gathering to an end."

As the cats dispersed, Iceslide nodded to Carrottail. "See you." The warrior purred and turned away to join his clan. Firetail and Soakedears turned to him, and Iceslide let out a purr. "You keep being the *skilled warriors* that you are."

"Will do." Firetail winked before he and Soakedears turned away. "Bye, Iceslide."

Iceslide started toward his own clan when he noticed one of his clanmates, Sunripple. He was standing by a WindClan she-cat, purring. He bumped heads with her before slowly turning away. The she-cat stared after him warmly.

I'm glad I'm not the only one with close friends in other clans! Iceslide thought. *Maybe Sunripple understands that it's okay too. He must know how different it feels from being stuck with your own clanmates.*

Chapter 7

[image]

It was morning, and the sun was shining in the sky. It was a warmer day today. Many cats were in the clearing, relaxing or sharing prey. Iceslide stretched out in the grass, letting out a purr of content. *It hasn't been this warm in a while!* He rolled onto his back and looked across the clearing. He saw Blizzardfur and Coralshine laying together, purring loudly. He felt a rush of happiness for his brother. *They make a good couple.* He began wondering if he would ever have a mate. *Violet is the only cat I really like.* He sighed and closed his eyes. *I wish we could be together...* He decided to talk to her about this the next time he was in twolegplace.

I could go now... He opened his eyes and nearly had a heart attack. "Ah!"

"Hi!" Lilynose stood over him, her pale green eyes shining.

For StarClan's sake! Iceslide quickly stumbled to his paws. "H-Hi, Lilynose..."

"You looked comfortable," She purred. After a moment, she froze. "I didn't disturb you, did I?"

"Oh, no, not at all," Iceslide mumbled, slowly relaxing. "What do you want?"

Lilynose hesitated, looking at her paws. "I-I was wondering if you'd like to go hunting with me." Her tail twitched hopefully. "Just the two of us. It'll be fun!"

Oh please, no. He tensed at the thought of having to waste time hunting. *I just want to see Violet!* "Err, well..."

Her green eyes shone with hope, and Iceslide's heart twisted with guilt. *I don't like her, but I don't want to hurt her feelings.* "I... Sure..."

Lilynose's eyes lit with joy, and her tail shot into the air. "Really? I mean, great!" She hurried toward the camp exit, waving her tail at him. "Let's go!"

Oh, what have I gotten myself into? Iceslide groaned and reluctantly followed her out of camp.

***

"Good catch!" Lilynose exclaimed as Iceslide pounced on a mouse. "The kits will love it! Or the elders!"

Iceslide swallowed back a growl of annoyance. They'd been hunting for a while now, and he wanted nothing more than to run to twolegplace where he didn't have to hear Lilynose's constant commentary. She was driving him crazy.

"Well, I think we have enough now." He tried to sound cheerful. "Let's go."

She nodded, and they gathered their fresh kill. As they headed back to camp, Iceslide could feel her watching him and flattened his ears. *What's her fascination with me? Why can't she bother someone else?* He tried to comfort himself in knowing he was now free to go to twolegplace. *As soon as we drop this prey off, I'll go!*

When they reached the camp, they deposited their prey on the fresh kill pile. In the nursery, Petalfin's kits seemed to be waiting. They scampered out of the den, eyes lit with excitement.

"Look what the warriors caught!" Willowkit exclaimed, clamping her teeth around the tail of a mouse and dragging it toward her. "I'm gonna bring it to the elders!"

"No, I will!" Darkkit protested and pounced on her. As the two kits fought playfully, their brother, Mintkit, snatched the mouse up and hurried toward the elders den. The other kits called out to him in protest and ran after him.

Lilynose let out an amused purr. "Isn't it a great feeling, bringing prey back for the clan?"

Before Iceslide could respond, a cat meowed behind him. "It certainly is."

Oh, no. He flinched and turned to see Frostedcloud standing behind him, his blue eyes fixed on him. *Not that piece of mouse-dung!*

"And some of us could use more of that feeling." He narrowed his eyes at Iceslide. "It's about time you started pulling your weight around here. You never go on patrols, and when you do, you run off. I wonder where?"

Iceslide's tail twitched with irritation. "It's none of your business what I do," He retorted. "I'll patrol when I want to patrol and hunt when I want to hunt." Before Frostedcloud could respond, he added, "In fact, I think I'll go now." He met the deputy's gaze. "If that's quite alright with you, Frostedcloud?"

The RiverClan deputy studied him, his eyes narrowed to slits. Iceslide returned his gaze calmly, tail lashing. "Very well, Iceslide." He growled at last. "You go hunting."

Iceslide nodded shortly and turned away, heading for the camp exit. *There's no way I'm going hunting for you.* He thought crossly. *I'm going to twolegplace where my friends are.* He bounded across the stepping stones, his heart racing with excitement. *And Violet.*

***

He nearly ran all the way to twolegplace. Frustration over Frostedcloud's words pulsed through him. *He thinks he's so smart and he can control every cat just because he's deputy! He's nothing but an annoying furball!*

It wasn't long before he reached Juicy's home. He climbed over the fence and leaped down onto the soft grass on the other side. Sure enough, the orange and white kittypet was lounging on his lawnchair. Parrot and Violet were laying near him, looking content.

"Iceslide!" Violet perked up when she saw him and got to her paws,

padding over to him.

He let out a loud purr and hurried toward her, touching his nose to hers. "Violet! I missed you." Happiness filled his heart at being so close to her again. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." She licked his head, and he purred loudly. "Better now that you're here. Are you alright?"

"Now I am." He gazed at her for a moment longer before looking up at Juicy, who had rolled over to see him. "Hi, Juicy."

"Hello, Iceslide," The kittypet yawned. "How's life in the forest?"

He hesitated. "It's as well as it can be." He looked to Parrot. "Hey Pa-" He broke off, blinking. "Parrot?"

The black and red tom was rolling around in the grass, purring very loudly and rubbing his muzzle all over a fuzzy yellow thing. "Oh, hiiiiii Icey..." He purred.

Iceslide blinked, studying him. "What's up with you? You're acting weird."

"His twolegs gave him that catnip toy," Juicy meowed, looking amused. "He's been all over it all day."

"Catnip?" He echoed, looking at the yellow thing that Parrot was so excited over. "What's that?"

Violet's blue eyes gleamed with amusement. "It's the stuff inside it."

"It's soooooooo gooooood!" Parrot purred loudly and licked it. "Try iiittttttt!" He twisted and rolled around in the grass before pawing the toy toward him.

Iceslide frowned. *Twoleg things are weird...* He crouched by the catnip toy and sniffed it. *What's so great about-* He froze as the strong, pleasant scent reached his tongue. *Oh...* He began to sniff quickly all over it. "That smell...!"

"Aaaannnd there he goes." Juicy chuckled.

The kittypets were watching him, but Iceslide was unaware, completely mystified by this "catnip". "Whoa!" He purred loudly and flopped onto his side, rubbing his whiskers against the soft fabric as he drank in the mouth watering aroma. "This stuff is amazzziiinnngggg!" He licked at the thing. "It feels goooooood!"

Iceslide flipped onto his back and rolled in the grass, a fierce purr rumbling in his throat. "Guyyyyys! It's such a nice day!" He let out a purr and raised his paw to the sky. "Looook at the sunnnnn!"

Juicy and Parrot were laughing their heads off at him, but Iceslide was in such a deep daze he was hardly aware. He began pawing toward the sun, staring up at it. "I-I-I'm gonna get it!"

Something nudged him, and he realized that Violet was at his side. "I think that's enough, Iceslide," She purred in amusement. "You can't be like this when you go home."

"But the sunnnn!" Iceslide protested, continuing to stretch his paw toward it. "Let's go to the sun!"

"Come on," She chuckled and nudged him to his paws, but he stumbled and fell back onto the grass. He stretched out his paw, reaching for the catnip toy, but Parrot picked it up and backed away, his eyes gleaming.

"That's enough catnip for you." Parrot chuckled. "Warriors aren't used to that stuff."

But I want more...! Iceslide silently protested, but he was too dazed to move. He rested his chin in the grass and sighed.

Violet purred and settled beside him, and he let out a purr as her pelt brushed against his. "Rest for a bit," She meowed softly. "It'll wear off soon."

Iceslide relaxed against her and closed his eyes, purring loudly. After a few minutes, he felt better. "Wow," He chuckled, looking at Juicy and Parrot. "That stuff is great!"

"You should have seen yourself!" Parrot laughed. "Trying to get the sun!"

Iceslide purred, looking up at the sky. He realized that the sun had moved a fair distance since he got here. "I should leave soon..." He hesitated, looking beside him at Violet. "But first, can we talk? Alone?"

She blinked at him warmly. "Sure." She stood and twitched her tail for him to follow. They padded around the side of the house and sat down by some bushes. "What is it?" Violet prompted.

Iceslide's stomach twisted with unease. *What do I say? What will she think?* "I like you," He meowed hesitantly.

"I like you too," Violet purred in response.

He shuffled his paws. "No, I-I mean..."

"I know what you mean." Violet stepped closer to him and rubbed her head against his. Iceslide let out a loud purr. "I've loved you for a long time."

"Me too." Iceslide let out a purr of happiness. "You're a great cat, and I want to be your mate."

Violet purred and licked his ear. "And I want to be yours." She hesitated. "But how?"

"What do you mean?" He blinked, his fur prickling with unease.

"I'm a house cat, and you're a clan cat," Violet meowed quietly. "We won't be together all the time." She looked at him hopefully. "You could live here? My twolegs would take you in if you looked hungry enough."

Iceslide hesitated, his fur prickling at the thought of living with twolegs. And he would have to be away from Grayshadow, Whitedapple, Blizzardfur, Winterlight... All of his clan friends... He couldn't give that up. "I can't... That life isn't for me. Would you join RiverClan?"

Violet's eyes widened. "Me? In the wild? Killing mice and fish for survival? Being alone and cold?"

"You'd be with me," Iceslide pointed out, touching his nose to hers.

She shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, Iceslide. I belong here." She hesitated, her blue eyes clouding with sadness. "Besides, you wouldn't want to be with me."

Iceslide blinked. "Of course I do!"

"You don't understand." She looked down. "I can't have kits. You see, most twolegs take their cats to the vet. I don't know what happens there, but once they come back, they're unable to have kits." She closed her eyes, as though preparing for him to turn away.

Iceslide felt a rush of sympathy. He shifted closer to her and licked her forehead. "I don't care about that. Kits are noisy and annoying, and you're great. So there's no problem there."

Violet was quiet for a moment, seeming startled. Then, she let out an amused purr, rubbing her head against his. "You're a very special cat, Iceslide." He purred loudly.

After a moment, she stepped back. "You should get back to your clan."

"Okay..." Iceslide's heart sunk. "I wish I could stay here."

Violet gazed at him longingly. "Me too."

They touched noses before Iceslide turned away. "Tell Parrot and Juicy I said bye." He leaped onto the fence and gazed at her. She stared back at him, purring before she turned away and disappeared around the corner of the house.

Iceslide stared after her, letting out a sigh of happiness. *She loves me! We'll figure it out... We'll find a way to be together. And nothing can stop us!* He crouched and leaped down onto the other side of the fence. *Nothing-*

"Well, well."

Iceslide's heart nearly shot out of his chest as he found himself face

to face with Frostedcloud. The RiverClan deputy stared at him through narrowed eyes. *Oh no!*

"F-Frostedcloud!" Iceslide swallowed, his mind racing. "I-I was just-"

"Hunting, eh?" He growled. "I'm sure there's plenty of prey in twolegplace."

Iceslide stared at him, stunned. His paws were frozen to the ground. "You followed me!"

"And it's a good thing I did!" Frostedcloud snarled, and Iceslide flattened his ears. "I knew you couldn't be trusted. You're never up to any good!"

Iceslide searched desperately for an explanation. "I-I can explain! You see, I-"

"Silence!" The deputy snapped. "You can explain all of it to Shimmerstar when we get back to camp." He spun and lashed his tail for him to follow. "Let's go."

"But-"

"Now!" Frostedcloud snarled angrily, and Iceslide lowered his head, his heart pounding as he followed. *Oh, StarClan... Now what?*

***

The sun was setting over the river. Frostedcloud didn't say a word to him the whole way back to camp. And neither did Iceslide. He was too busy fretting over what awaited him. *Will they drive me out? Will I ever see Violet again? Maybe Shimmerstar will understand! No, of course she won't! Stupid clan rules!*

They crossed the stepping stones into the camp. Iceslide looked around nervously. He saw Grayshadow and Whitedapple laying by the side of the clearing, speaking to Shorestep. Frozenripple was outside of the nursery playing with his kits. Petalfin watched, purring. Blizzardfur, Coralshine, and Winterlight were at the fresh kill pile.

"Iceslide!" Lilynose saw him from where she sat by the warriors den and ran over to him. "Where have you been?" When he didn't respond, she grew concerned. "Are you okay?"

Frostedcloud stopped outside Shimmerstar's den. "Shimmerstar!" He called. "We need to speak with you."

Many cats were watching them now, curious about what was going on.*Oh StarClan, this is bad.... This is really, really bad.* Iceslide swallowed as Shimmerstar padded out of her den, followed by Salmonstripe. The warrior nodded to her before padding away. The RiverClan leader turned to Frostedcloud and Iceslide. "What's going on?"

"Look who I found." Frostedcloud flicked his tail toward Iceslide. "He was supposed to be hunting. Instead, he was in a twoleg yard hanging out with his kittypet friends."

There were several startled gasps and snarls of disbelief. "What?" Grayshadow stared at him. "You can't be serious!"

"Why would you want to be around *kittypets?"* Blizzardfur exclaimed.

Shimmerstar stared at Iceslide. "Is this true?" She demanded.

Iceslide was quiet for a moment. "Yes, Shimmerstar," He responded. "I see no wrong in it. It's my life, and I can do what I want with it."

The clan was in a stunned silence. Shimmerstar closed her eyes, and Iceslide's heart pounded nervously. At last, she spoke. "Iceslide. You are a warrior of Riverclan."

"I know." He met her gaze. "I-"

"Then why don't you act like it?" Shimmerstar suddenly snarled, and Iceslide flinched back. "You're never in the camp. You hardly ever bring back prey for your clanmates. You spent today in twolegplace, and I assume it's not the first time." She narrowed her eyes. "This kind of behavior cannot be tolerated. Not in my clan." She turned and leaped onto the rock where she called meetings.

Iceslide's heart pounded with anxiety. "Shimmerstar, I-"

"Silence!" She snapped and glared down at him. "Iceslide, from this day forward until you have proven yourself worthy of your warrior name, you shall be known as Icepaw."

"What?" Icepaw gasped in shock, his mind spinning. "You can't do that!"

Shimmerstar narrowed her eyes. "Just as I have the power to give warrior names, I can take them away from those who haven't lived up to them." She lashed her tail. "You will repeat your apprenticeship under Frozenripple until you have proven your understanding of the warrior code. When you do, you will return to your warrior duties. Until then, you are an apprentice."

"No!" He was unable to contain the fury pulsing through him. "That's crazy! You can't do that!" He snarled furiously. "You-"

"Enough!" Shimmerstar snarled down at him. "You're an apprentice now, Icepaw. I advise you get some sleep. I expect you'll have training in the morning." She leaped down from the rock and disappeared into her den.

Icepaw was left in shock. He nervously looked around. Some cats stared at him in shock, fury, some even looked sympathetic. Grayshadow and Whitedapple looked stunned, while Blizzardfur shook his head. Lilynose stared at him sadly.

He sighed and turned away. *I never should have left twolegplace... Then I'd be with Violet right now, and not in this mess.*

Chapter 8

[image]

"That's it, now swipe at me."

Icepaw shot a paw at Frozenripple, resisting the urge to unsheathe his claws. "I know!" He snapped.

Frozenripple ducked and stepped back, nodding approvingly. "Okay, let's practice the belly rake." He turned away and flicked his fluffy tail.

"No!" He sat down stubbornly. "I already know all of this!"

The long furred tom sighed. "Get up, Icepaw. Shimmerstar ordered me to retrain you, and that's what I'm going to do."

Icepaw glared at the warrior. "Don't call me that. My name is Iceslide!" As his mentor closed his eyes, he went on, tail lashing. "Come on, you're wasting your time. Can't you just lie to Shimmerstar and say we trained?"

"I don't lie to my leader," Frozenripple meowed quietly, his eyes narrowing.

"You could be with Petalfin or your kits right now!"

"Yes, I *could* be, if *some* cat hadn't decided he'd rather spend time with kittypets than care for his clan!" Frozenripple suddenly snapped, and Icepaw flattened his ears. "Now, we're battle training whether you like it or not." He stepped back and watched him. "Come at me."

Icepaw gritted his teeth and lunged at him. Frustration surged through his body as he thrust the silver and white tabby onto his back, pushing his paws into his long fur. Frozenripple kicked his hind legs up at his stomach, and Icepaw grunted in surprise as he was thrown off of the warrior.

Frozenripple rolled to his paws and shook grass from his long fur. "Not bad," He meowed. "But you can do better. You weren't prepared for me to kick you. You should have..."

He ignored his mentor as he went on and looked up, wanting to yowl at the sky in frustration. *This is ridiculous! I'm not a stupid apprentice! I'm a warrior!* His paws itched to run to twolegplace and never return to RiverClan. He could be free of responsibilities and training sessions with Frozenripple. He could be happy with Violet. *I wouldn't have to be a kittypet. He realized. I could just live around there. It would be fine! I-*

"Icepaw?"

He snapped out of his thoughts at Frozenripple's voice. He was looking at him, twitching his tail impatiently. "Did you hear me?" He asked.

"Of course," Icepaw lied, narrowing his eyes.

"Good." Frozenripple tilted his head suspiciously. "Than do what I said."

Oh no. Icepaw hesitated. Just as he was about to admit he hadn't been listening, the reeds rustled behind him. He turned to see Salmonstripe, Heronpaw, and Lilynose appear.

"There you are," Salmonstripe meowed, dipping his head to

Frozenripple. "Frostedcloud wanted you and Icesl- Icepaw, to join our hunting patrol."

Frozenripple glanced at Icepaw as though letting him know how lucky he was that the patrol had showed up when it had. "Very well." He flicked his tail and padded over to the others. "Let's go, Icepaw."

Icepaw flattened his ears. *Iceslide! It's Iceslide!* His insides pulsed with frustration every time he was called by his apprentice name. He sighed and slowly followed his clanmates, his tail drooping.

As they walked, Lilynose slowed her pace and fell in beside him. He couldn't look at her. "I'm sorry," She meowed quietly, sounding sympathetic. "It must be hard."

Icepaw hung his head, his tail twitching with irritation. He didn't want to deal with her right now. He was frustrated enough as is.

Lilynose brushed her shoulder against his as they walked. "You're still Iceslide to me," She meowed quietly, sounding sympathetic. "And you're one of the greatest warriors in RiverClan."

"Thanks," Icepaw mumbled unenthusiastically. *It doesn't change the fact that I'm "Icepaw" to everyone else!*

The patrol continued walking until they reached the river. Frozenripple crouched by the water, his tail twitching slowly as he watched for fish.

"Come on, Heronpaw." Salmonstripe flicked his tail, gesturing for his apprentice to follow him as he headed closer to the river. "Let's see if you've mastered fishing yet."

The long legged dark gray apprentice raised his head confidently. "You bet I have. I can reach any fish I see!"

Salmonstripe's eyes gleamed with amusement. "There's more to fishing than that. Remember all the tactics I've taught you."

"Oh, right." Heronpaw nodded. "Of course, I remember."

As the two cats began to look for fish, Lilynose turned to Icepaw. "Would you like to fish together?" She asked, looking embarrassed. "We make a good team, you know..."

Icepaw sighed. "Not now, Lilynose. I'd rather be alone." He turned away.

Lilynose stared after him. "Oh, okay..." She hesitated before turning away, her tail drooping.

He padded further down the river where he could be alone. He crouched by the river and stared down into the depths of the rippling water, his heart aching. *It's only been one day, and I already miss Violet... And Juicy... Parrot, Truffle... All of them.* He closed his eyes. I wonder what they're doing? He reached out and began dabbing at the water with his paw. *That feels nice...*

"Icepaw!"

He winced at the name and looked over to see Frozenripple watching him from a distance. "Are you fishing, or playing like a kit?" He called. "I expect to see you've caught something by the end of the day."

Icepaw let out a sigh. "Don't worry, Frozenripple." He growled. *I'll catch enough fish to make you be happy and shut up.*

***

The sun was setting by the time they returned to camp. He'd caught four fish, and it seemed to have been enough to make the others happy. But he didn't dare admit that he'd missed at least eight fish. He wasn't a very skilled hunter. *Fish are quick and slippery.* He thought. *I don't know how any cat catches them so easily.*

He deposited his fish on the fresh kill pile. Beside him, Heronpaw hauled in a huge trout that made his four little fish look like nothing. The gray tom sat down by his catch, lifting his chin proudly.

"Well done, Heronpaw," Salmonstripe nodded to his apprentice. "Go get some rest, you've earned it."

Frozenripple looked at his son proudly and purred. "Yes, you have." He licked Heronpaw's head before the apprentice ran off to join Heartpaw and Finpaw, who were sharing a mouse by the apprentices den.

Salmonstripe padded away from the others to bump heads with Shimmerstar. The two cats purred loudly. Lilynose padded past them, purring a greeting to her parents before disappearing into the warriors den.

Icepaw looked around and saw that most of the clan was relaxing and sharing tongues. He noticed Winterlight sharing a vole with Ravenfeather. The two cats were purring, and his sister's yellow eyes shone as she looked at the black furred tom. *Are they mates?* He wondered. *I've never noticed them so close.*

By the medicine den, the medicine cats were sorting herbs. "We'd better stock up on herbs before leaf-bare comes," Maplesky was meowing to Otterpelt. "You never know if an outbreak of green-cough could spread."

The red-brown she-cat nodded agreement. "We'll need catmint more than anything. Just this morning, Troutspots was complaining about a cough."

"Tell us more, Dewwhisker!"

Icepaw twitched his ear at the high pitched squeak. He looked toward the medicine den and saw his aunt and uncle; Shadepath and Dewwhisker, laying outside the elder's den. Frozenripple and Petalfin's three new kits were sitting in front of the two elders, staring up at them excitedly. No doubt they were being told a story. Icepaw remembered how Dewwhisker and Shadepath would tell the same stories to he and his siblings when they were kits. The elders stories seemed exciting and inspiring to every kit.

"What happened next?" Mintkit stared up at Dewwhisker wide eyed. "Did you beat the fox?"

The spotted tom purred. "Well, it almost had me. It cornered me right by the edge of the gorge! If I backed up any further, I would

have gone falling into the raging water below. The fox snarled, and got closer, and closer. I was trapped!"

The kits gasped all at once. "What did you do?" Willowkit exclaimed. "Did the fox get you?"

"Did you fall in?" Darkkit asked anxiously.

"Fall in? No." Dewwhisker's eyes gleamed. "But I jumped!"

The kits gasped, and Icepaw rolled his eyes from where he watched. *That's a lie.* He thought. The elders always made up things to make their stories more exciting. *Otherwise, who would want to listen?*

"Really?" Willowkit gasped in shock. "Why?"

"It was the only way." Dewwhisker meowed, sounding dead serious as he spoke. "I plunged into the river. The water was so strong I barely swam to shore, and-"

Shadepath flicked his ear with her tail. "If I remember correctly, Grayshadow's patrol arrived just in time and fought off the fox." Her eyes gleamed. "You never would have jumped into the gorge!"

The kits chuckled and scowled at Dewwhisker. "You were scared!" Darkkit purred.

"Warriors aren't scared of anything!" Willowkit added.

"Of course they are." Dewwhisker admitted, shooting an annoyed look at his denmate. "All warriors get scared sometimes."

Icepaw lost interest and padded toward the warriors den. *I could use a nap...*

"Hey, Icepaw!" Heartpaw called, and he turned to see her and her siblings watching him from outside the apprentices den. "You sleep here now, remember?"

Icepaw let out an annoyed sigh. *Ugh, I have to sleep in the apprentices den!* Shimmerstar had only allowed him to sleep in the warriors den last night, as he hadn't had a nest yet.

"Come on." Heronpaw waved his long tail. "We made you a nest!"

He reluctantly headed toward them, and they turned to eagerly bound into their den. He ducked and padded inside, glancing around. *I spent enough moons in here!*

"Over here!" Finpaw purred, gesturing to a nest at the back of the den. "We made it just for you!"

"It's full of moss and feathers," Heartpaw added, pawing at the nest. "We even lined it with some pretty rocks. Not every warrior gets to be an apprentice again!" She looked amused.

Heronpaw nodded, his amber eyes shining. "We wanted to make it special for you."

Icepaw sighed. "Oh, I feel special alright." The apprentices stepped back as he padded into the nest and settled in the soft moss. "Thanks," He added quietly.

"No problem, Ice*paw*." Finpaw purred. "You might have the den all to yourself soon enough!"

"Yeah," Heronpaw agreed, nudging his brother. "We'll be warriors soon!" The three apprentices laughed and ran out of the den, leaving Icepaw alone.

He drew in a deep breath, then sighed, resting his chin in the moss. *Thank StarClan... They'd better not keep me awake all night.* A feather tickled his nose, and he sneezed, flicking it away with his paw. *And they put far too many feathers in this nest.*

"Hey..."

He looked up to see Winterlight standing in the entrance of the den. She looked at him with sympathy in her yellow eyes.

"Hey," He replied quietly, not lifting his head from his nest.

His sister padded over and laid down beside him in the nest. "How are you doing?" She asked quietly.

Icepaw stared at the floor of the den. "I could be better."

Winterlight looked down. "I know it can't be easy," She meowed quietly. "But you'll be a warrior again soon enough." She paused. "As long as you don't go to twolegplace anymore."

"Mmm." Icepaw twitched his tail, longing to change the subject. "You and Ravenfeather are close," He commented, his eyes gleaming as he looked at his sister. "You sure spend a lot of time alone with him," He teased lightly.

She turned away, purring and looking embarrassed. "He's great," She admitted happily. "We fish and patrol together."

"Is that all you do together?" Icepaw teased.

Winterlight nudged him. "Shut up, Icepaw." Her ears were flat in embarrassment.

Icepaw chuckled, but decided to leave her alone. "Blizzardfur and Coralshine are close too," He commented. "They spend every moment together.'

"Yes," She agreed, looking outside the den. He followed her gaze and saw the couple now, sharing a fish together. "It seems everyone is finding someone." She looked at Icepaw and purred. "Have you?"

Yes. His heart sunk. *But the warrior code won't let us be together.* "No," He lied.

Winterlight's eyes gleamed. "You can't fool me, Icepaw. I've seen you with her."

Icepaw's heart skipped a beat as he stared at her. *Has she seen me with Violet? How? Has she followed me too?* "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," She chuckled. "Wherever you go, Lilynose goes. She's very fond of you."

"Lilynose?" He relaxed a little, then grew confused. "What?"

His sister looked amused. "You won't go hunting unless it's with her. Obviously she means a lot to you."

No! I don't like her at all! And she certainly can't be interested in me! I only go hunting with her because she makes me, or we just end up on a patrol together. Icepaw snorted. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Sure, sure," Winterlight purred.

"Winterlight!" Ravenfeather poked his head into the den, resting his amber eyes on her. "Want to go hunting?"

She perked up. "Of course!" She looked back at Icepaw. "I've got to go. Take care, Icepaw." She licked her brother's ear before leaving the den with Ravenfeather. The two cats purred and twined their tails together as they walked.

Icepaw let out a purr, glad to see his sister so happy. *She deserves it.* He settled in the moss and closed his eyes. *I hope I can be happy with Violet like that one day...*

Chapter 9

[image]

"Icepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Iceslide. You have proven yourself worthy of the name, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan once again."

Thank StarClan! Iceslide let out a sigh from where he stood below the meeting rock. *I was sick of being called Icepaw.* He had spent just over a moon as an apprentice. Staying in RiverClan territory had nearly driven him mad, and he missed Violet and his other friends deeply. He hadn't even been allowed to go to the gathering a few nights ago, as Frostedcloud had seen how close he was with cats from other clans.

Shimmerstar leaped down and padded up to him, resting her chin on his head. "I hope you've learned your lesson," She meowed quietly. "You are a warrior of RiverClan. Don't forget what that means."

"Yes, Shimmerstar," Iceslide responded quietly and licked her shoulder as customary. His heart twisted with sadness and frustration. *I can be a warrior and keep my friends... Can't I? It's not fair.*

"Iceslide!" Winterlight started the cheer, her yellow eyes warm as she looked at her brother. Ravenfeather sat close to her, blinking his amber eyes slowly at him. Iceslide could tell that the black warrior didn't approve of his kittypet outings.

A couple other cats cheered his new name, but most exchanged amused looks or shook their heads in disapproval.

"That cat is no warrior," Troutspots grumbled.

Beside him, Shorestep nodded agreement, narrowing her yellow eyes. "He should just stay in twolegplace."

He saw his parents among the cats at the side of the clearing. Grayshadow gave him a nod, while Whitedapple gazed at him proudly. They hadn't been too happy to learn what he'd been up to. But to Iceslide's relief, they never said much about it. Though he had seen the disappointment in their eyes whenever they saw him the past moon. He hoped that would end now that he was a warrior again.

"Congratulations, Iceslide." Coralshine meowed as she and Blizzardfur padded up to him.

Blizzardfur nudged him. "I was beginning to think I'd have to call you 'Icepaw' forever," He purred. "Are you sure you don't want to stay an apprentice?"

He snorted and playfully pushed his brother away. "Yeah! I'd much rather be a warrior."

"I certainly hope so."

Iceslide turned to see his old mentor, Frozenripple, approach him, twitching his fluffy tail. "I hope I won't have the pleasure of training you a third time," He warned, though his pale blue eyes gleamed teasingly.

"That makes two of us," Iceslide replied, dipping his head to the long furred warrior. *At this point, I hope I never see Frozenripple again!*

"Iceslide! Iceslide!"

Oh no. He took a deep breath and turned as Lilynose bounded up to him, her green eyes shining. "Congratulations! I knew you could do it."

"Thanks, Lilynose," Iceslide forced a purr. "It's good to have my name back."

He looked away and saw that Frozenripple had gone to his kits, who had been made warriors just before Iceslide. The three young cats had grown a lot in the past moon. Heartpaw had become Heartsong, a beautiful silver and white she-cat who looked very

similar to her mother. Petalfin was with her kits now, gazing at them proudly.

Beside Heartsong was her brother, formerly called Heronpaw. There had been only one suitable name for the long legged warrior. He was now called Heronleg. During the naming ceremony, Shimmerstar had praised the young tom for his outstanding hunting abilities, but warned him not to let his talents go to his head. Though Heronleg boasted often, she seemed sure that he would mature in time.

The last of the new warriors was Fintail, the fun loving young white tom. He held his silver striped tail proudly in the air as he spoke with his siblings.

Frozenripple purred as he watched his kits. Petalfin wrapped her black and silver tail around her mate as she looked at them proudly.

"I'm happy for you," Lilynose purred, gazing at Iceslide warmly and snapping his attention back to her.

"Err, thanks." Iceslide hesitated, glancing around awkwardly. His paws itched to move away from her. Why does she always have to be near me? "I-uh, I've got to go... Talk to someone." Before she could respond, he turned and padded to the other side of the clearing. To his dismay, he found himself behind Frostedcloud.

Oh no, I don't want to talk to him!

The RiverClan deputy had his back to him. He was talking to his mate, Swanpool, who was sitting outside the nursery. She had moved in a quarter moon ago.

"You shouldn't be out of the nursery," Frostedcloud sounded worried. "You should be resting."

The slender white queen let out a purr. "Don't be silly, Frostedcloud! I'm just enjoying the sun before leaf-bare arrives."

"Wouldn't you like a warm nest?" Frostedcloud fretted. "What if you get cold?"

Swanpool shook her head. "If I'm cold, I'll go inside." She gently flicked him on the nose with her tail. "Don't worry so much."

He still looked uneasy. "But-"

"Frostedcloud." Maplesky padded out of the medicine den, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "I assure you, fresh air isn't going to do Swanpool any harm. Queens can't stay cooped up in the nursery."

The clan deputy looked embarrassed. "I know, but..."

"She'll be fine," The light brown medicine cat promised. "You should do something to keep yourself busy rather than worry about Swanpool." He looked up at the bright sky. "I believe you have a couple patrols to send out."

Frostedcloud hesitated before dipping his head. "I suppose you would know best, Maplesky." He turned to his mate. "Are you sure you-"

"For StarClan's sake, I'm fine!" Swanpool purred in amusement. "You have patrols to arrange. Now go on, or I'll tell Shimmerstar you're avoiding your duties."

The deputy let out an amused purr. "Fine, fine." He touched noses with her. "I'll see you later." He turned away, and Iceslide tensed as the deputy caught his eye. "Iceslide." He gave him a curt nod.

"Frostedcloud." Iceslide twitched his tail. He grew uneasy and frustrated. He and the deputy still weren't on the best terms since he'd caught him in twolegplace. For a moment it was silent, and neither cat seemed to know what to say.

"I'm sending out hunting patrols," The white tom meowed at last, studying Iceslide. "Would you care to join one?"

Ugh! I hate patrols! But there's no way I want to be reverted to an apprentice again. Iceslide sighed. "I'd love to."

"Good." Frostedcloud nodded approvingly and looked past him at the other cats in the clearing. "Mudslip!" He called.

The brown warrior was sitting, speaking to his daughter, Warmpaw. He turned his attention to Frostedcloud as he was called. "Yes?"

"I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol," Frostedcloud meowed as Mudslip padded up to them. "Take Iceslide with you, and..." He scanned the clearing. "Shallowpool, Cherryberry!" He called, and the two warriors hurried over. "You can join them."

"Shall I bring Willowpaw?" Cherryberry asked, flicking her reddish brown tail to her apprentice.

The deputy nodded. "Of course." He looked to Mudslip. "Mintpaw could come as well."

Mudslip shook his head. "We were out battle training all morning," He meowed. "I think he's earned a break."

"Very well," Frostedcloud agreed. He hesitated and glanced at Iceslide. "I wish you good hunting."

Iceslide narrowed his eyes. "You think I won't hunt?"

"Let's get moving," Mudslip cut in before Frostedcloud could respond, clearly aware of the tension between them. "We're running out of daylight."

"Yeah, let's go!" Willowpaw gave an excited little bounce, looking up at Cherryberry. "I want to practice that fishing move you taught me."

Cherryberry let out a purr as she and Mudslip began to turn away. "You nearly had it last time." Willowpaw hurried alongside her.

Iceslide cast a glance at Frostedcloud, lashing his tail before following the patrol out of camp.

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Ha! Iceslide shot his paw into the water and hooked his claws into a fish. He batted it onto the shore and delivered the killing bite. It was his third catch. *That should be enough to please Frostedcloud.*

SPLASH

"Mouse dung!" Willowpaw exclaimed from where she crouched by the river. She shook water from her forepaw which she had just shot into the water. "It got away!"

Cherryberry stepped to her side. "That was very good," She praised. "But you cast a shadow over the water just before you struck."

"Sorry," Willowpaw sighed, twitching her silver tail. "I'll do it right next time."

Mudslip padded to Iceslide's side, studying the water. "Iceslide, why don't you try further down toward the gorge?" He suggested. We'll cover more of the river if we split up."

"Okay." Iceslide buried his fish and began heading further down the river. He'd been walking for a bit when he paused, glancing behind him at the others. He was a fair distance away from them now.

This would be a great opportunity to go to twolegplace... He looked back. He could see the roof of a twoleg nest in the distance beyond the trees of SkyClan territory. His paws longed to run there, to Violet, to Juicy, to all of his good friends. He suddenly thought of something. *Is that why Mudslip sent me on my own? To test me? I wouldn't be surprised if Frostedcloud put him up to it.*

He sighed and shook his head. I can't risk it. If I'm caught, Shimmerstar might make me an apprentice *again!* There's no way I'm going through *that* again. He stared toward twolegplace longingly. *I'm sorry... I'll find a way to get back to you as soon as possible...*

He saw movement from the corner of his eye and snapped his attention to it. A mouse was scurrying through the grass, looking for shelter. It paused and sniffed at a fallen leaf. *For now, I need to show my clan I care.* Iceslide crouched and slowly crept toward the mouse.

Crunch!

He froze as his hind paw stepped down on a dry leaf. The mouse

immediately began scurrying away. Iceslide hissed in annoyance and gave chase. *Why am I such a bad hunter?* When they neared the twoleg bridge,the mouse leaped into the long grass by the shore and disappeared somewhere beyond it.

Iceslide narrowed his eyes. *Unless it can swim, it should be trapped.* He charged through the long grass, but forgot about the mouse immediately. He stumbled to a halt, startled.

Sunripple?

His clanmate was sitting under the twoleg bridge, purring and nuzzling a creamy white she-cat. At Iceslide's sudden presence, the two cats jerked apart, their eyes lighting with alarm.

"Iceslide!" Sunripple stammered, his yellow and white tabby fur bristling. The she-cat looked frozen, her eyes wide.

After a moment, Iceslide recognized her. It was the WindClan she-cat he'd seen Sunripple with a few moons ago at the gathering. "What's going on?" He asked hesitantly, though he already had a good guess. "You're a WindClan cat, aren't you?"

"Y-yes..." The WindClan warrior stared at him nervously. Sunripple stepped closer to her, eyeing Iceslide. The she-cat let out a distressed whimper. "He's going to tell your clan! It's over, isn't it?"

"It's okay, Dreamwhisper. Nothing will keep us apart." Sunripple rested his chin on her head and glared at Iceslide. "Go ahead, tell them." He growled. "I'm not ashamed of being in love."

"What?" Iceslide blinked, still shocked at his discovery. I never would have thought Sunripple would love a cat from another clan! He's very good at hiding this secret. "No, I won't tell anyone."

The two cats looked startled. "What?" Sunripple stared at Iceslide in disbelief. "You're not going to tell Shimmerstar?"

"Of course not," Iceslide replied, feeling a rush of irritation. "The clan would never understand. I know what it's like to have secrets. Yours is safe with me."

Dreamwhisper stared at him, her green eyes wide and anxious. "You mean it? You won't tell on us?"

"I won't," Iceslide assured them. "I promise."

The two cats exchanged an uncertain look. Sunripple studied Iceslide for a moment, then slowly nodded. "We can trust Iceslide. He understands things like this."

Dreamwhisper let out a sigh of relief, her fur flattening. "Thank you," She murmured. "Thank you so much, Iceslide."

"You're welcome." Iceslide dipped his head. It was quiet and awkward for a moment.

Sunripple hesitated and turned to Dreamwhisper. "I should go." He licked her head. "Meet again tomorrow?"

"Of course," Dreamwhisper purred and nuzzled him. The two cats touched noses before Dreamwhisper turned away and hurried down the river back toward the moor.

Sunripple and Iceslide turned and padded back through RiverClan territory. Neither cat spoke for a few moments.

"Thank you," The gold and yellow warrior meowed at last. "I-"

"Iceslide!"

The two cats jumped a little. Mudslip was padding over to them, followed by Cherryberry and Willowpaw. The two cats held several fish in their mouths. The apprentice held her head high, looking quite proud of herself.

"We're going back to camp," Mudslip meowed. "Are you ready?"

Iceslide nodded, and they began heading back to camp. He glanced behind him at Sunripple. *I hope he has more success hiding his secret than I did...*

Chapter 10

[image]

"Iceslide... Psst."

He awoke to a paw prodding his side. He blinked open his eyes and looked up to see Sunripple standing over him. It was still night. The warrior's yellow eyes shone in the darkness. Iceslide yawned and looked at him. "Wha-"

"Shhh!" Sunripple whispered and turned, gesturing with his tail for him to follow. "Come with me." He looked around the crowded den cautiously, afraid to wake anyone up.

What's going on? Iceslide blinked and slowly stood in his nest, looking around. Dipfoot and Shallowpool were curled up against each other, sound asleep. Creekleap lay on his back, snoring. Beyond him, Winterlight and Ravenfeather were laying asleep together. Ravenfeather's head was rested on her neck. He scanned the other warriors. No cat seemed to be awake.

Sunripple stood at the entrance of the den, looking over his shoulder at Iceslide urgently. Iceslide carefully weaved through the sleeping cats and exited the den.

"What's up?" Iceslide whispered, sensing there was a good reason they were being so careful not to wake anyone. *Does it have something to do with Dreamwhisper?*

"You'll see when we're out of camp," Sunripple breathed back, twitching his tail. "Follow me." He headed behind the apprentices den and slipped through a gap in the bed of reeds that lined the camp. Iceslide followed him. He knew this route very well. He'd often used it to sneak out of camp when he was an apprentice.

Iceslide was confused as they headed through the territory. "Where are we going?" He asked. Sunripple didn't respond, and they continued walking in silence. They were nearly at the border when

Iceslide saw two cats up ahead, ones that he knew very well. His heart skipped a beat in shock. *Is that-*

"Iceslide!" Truffle charged and crashed into him, pinning him on his back into the leaves. "You're okay!" His yellow eyes lit with joy. "Where have you been? What happened?"

"Truffle?" Iceslide gasped in shock.

Sulfur let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness!" He padded over to them. "It's good to see you, Iceslide."

Iceslide gently pushed the kittypet off of him and stumbled to his paws, blinking at his friends. "What are you doing on RiverClan territory? What's going on?" He looked at Sunripple.

His clanmate looked amused. "I met with Dreamwhisper earlier tonight. I was on my way back when I found these two," He gestured to Truffle and Sulfur. "Wandering on the outskirts of RiverClan territory yowling your name. I figured you knew them and told them I'd get you before they woke up the entire forest."

Sulfur glanced at Truffle. "I told him to shut up, but would he listen?"

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?" The cream kittypet shrugged.

"You're lucky I heard you and not someone else," Sunripple commented.

Iceslide nodded, staring at his friends. "It was a dangerous to do." He let out a purr and stepped forward to touch noses with Truffle, then Sulfur. "But it's great to see you! I've missed you so much."

"We've missed you too!" Truffle stared at him. "Where have you been? It's been over a moon!"

"We thought something had happened to you," Sulfur added. "We thought you might be dead."

His heart ached with guilt. "I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm okay, I just..." He hesitated. "I got caught with some other kittypets and got

in trouble. I couldn't leave the territory."

The cats exchanged a worried look. "Can we still be friends?" Truffle asked quietly.

Iceslide's stomach twisted. "I'll find a way to keep meeting you," He promised. "I can't just abandon my friends."

Truffle looked relieved, and Sulfur nodded. "Just be careful. Don't get yourself in trouble for us."

"I'll be careful." Iceslide looked over his shoulder to make sure that no one was watching them. "You two should go home. I'll come to Truffle's place to meet you when I can."

"Okay." Sulfur yawned and shook out his yellow fur. "I'd like to get to my den and sleep."

Truffle nodded agreement. "See you around, Iceslide."

"Goodbye." Iceslide watched as the two cats padded away and disappeared into the darkness. After a moment, he turned to Sunripple. "Thanks," He meowed quietly. "You won't tell anyone, will you..?"

The golden tabby shook his head. "Of course not," He meowed. "You're keeping my secret, so I'll keep yours." He paused and turned away, flicking his tail for Iceslide to follow. "I'd like to talk to you about yesterday."

"Sure." Iceslide padded alongside his clanmate, and they walked together quietly in the night. It was peaceful. Crickets chirped in the dark grass, and a frog croaked softly somewhere by the river.

"Me and Dreamwhisper have been meeting for moons," Sunripple meowed quietly. "We're in love."

Iceslide nodded. "There's nothing wrong with that." He commented.

Sunripple sighed. "Not according to the warrior code. It can keep us safe, but it can also hold us back from happiness, and our freedom to love." He looked at Iceslide. "You understand that, don't you?

Ever since you were a kit, you've been curious about the world outside the clan boundaries. You've made friends, good ones, but the clan despises you for it."

"Yes," He meowed, his tail lashing. "The code isn't fair."

His companion nodded agreement. "The warrior code tells us to find a mate within our clan. But sometimes that doesn't happen. Sometimes there is no cat in the clan meant for us," He paused. "Does that mean we should be destined to be alone?"

"Exactly!" Iceslide exclaimed, suddenly realizing how much he had in common with this warrior. "I don't get along with many RiverClan warriors. But I've made a lot of friends outside of the clan. There are a lot of amazing cats out there. Why should we be limited to one pawful?"

Sunripple nodded. "Right! There's no cat in RiverClan like Dreamwhisper." He paused and let out an amused purr. "And there certainly isn't one like Truffle."

Or Violet. Iceslide thought, his heart throbbing as he thought of her. *I miss her so much!* "I've met a she-cat too," He admitted. "I haven't seen her in over a moon though."

He looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry. You'll find a way. No cat is better at sneaking away than you. I don't think you ever spent a whole day in camp when you were an apprentice!"

"Who would want to?" Iceslide chuckled, and his clanmate joined in. After a moment, he looked at him with a pang of gratitude. "You're the first RiverClan cat to understand."

Sunripple dipped his head. "I never expected you to keep me and Dreamwhisper a secret. Thank you for that."

"You're welcome." Iceslide looked up at the dark sky. "We should get back to camp before dawn." He meowed. "Before some cat notices we're gone."

The gold and yellow warrior nodded. "Good idea." He nudged him. "You're lucky those kittypets didn't wake up everyone!"

Iceslide let out a purr. Perhaps this was the start of a friendship. At last, one of his clanmates understood how he felt about cats outside of the clan. They could help each other keep their companions hidden, and discuss the troubles they faced.

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Though he was tired, Iceslide found himself unable to fall back asleep. He lay in his nest as time passed, his mind awake and swimming with thoughts. He thought of Violet and wondered what she was doing right now. Did she miss him? Was she worried? Was she okay? Would he see her again? What if someone found out about he and Sunripple's secrets? Did the other kittypets miss him?

Eventually, he gave up on sleeping and sighed, rolling over and stretching in his nest. He could see pale morning light shining through the reeds in the roof of the den. He got up and padded past his sleeping clanmates out into the clearing, blinking his tired, dry eyes.

The clearing was empty, all but Otterpelt. The medicine cat apprentice was sitting outside of her den, staring up at the sky.

Iceslide shrugged. *Must be weird medicine cat stuff.* He began padding across the clearing toward the fresh kill pile. She spotted him and nearly leaped out of her fur, bristling.

He stopped and blinked at her, startled. "Are you okay?"

Otterpelt didn't respond. She stared at him and slowly relaxed. "What? Yes... I'm fine."

Iceslide wasn't sure he believed that. But he wasn't going to bother her about it. He sniffed at a fish in the fresh kill pile. He was about to take it for himself when Otterpelt appeared beside him and crouched.

"Iceslide," She meowed quietly. "Have you left RiverClan territory since you got caught?"

He narrowed his eyes. *Did Frostedcloud put her up to this? He must have.* "No." He muttered.

The reddish brown she-cat stared at him, her eyes wide and uneasy. "You can't leave..."

Iceslide blinked at her. "I know."

"No... You don't." The medicine cat whispered, her eyes filled with distress. "You have to stay in RiverClan territory. You *have* to! If you-"

"Otterpelt!" Maplesky called from the medicine den, looking alarmed. "Come here, I need your help, uh, sorting herbs."

She didn't respond, her wide eyes fixed on Iceslide. He stared back, alarmed and confused. *Has she gone mad?*

"Otterpelt!"

The medicine cat stared at Iceslide. "Please, stay," She whispered desperately before hurrying over to the medicine den.

Iceslide stared after her for a moment. *That was weird...* He shook his head. *It's probably just something Frostedcloud or Shimmerstar said. Or even just the wild imagination of a medicine cat.*

***

Iceslide crouched in the grass, stalking a mouse. When he was close enough, he pounced, relieved that he'd been too quick for it. He swiftly delivered the killing bite and picked it up, turning to return to the others.

He'd been sent on a hunting patrol with Mudslip, Mintpaw, Petalfin, Ravenfeather, and Winterlight. There were many things he'd rather be doing.

When he reached them, he saw that Ravenfeather was missing. He set down his mouse and looked at Winterlight. "Where's Raven-"

Just then, the black warrior stepped out of the bushes, holding a large trout in his jaws. He lowered his head and dropped it at his paws. "I caught it in the river."

"Wow," Winterlight gazed at him proudly. "Isn't Ravenfeather an amazing hunter?"

Ravenfeather purred and padded up to her, touching his nose to hers. "Not as amazing as you." He sat beside her. "We can share the trout when we get back to camp."

"Look!" A muffled voice mewed, and Mintpaw padded up to them, holding a dead vole in his jaws.

"Good catch!" Mudslip praised his apprentice. Mintpaw held his vole proudly, his tail waving.

Petalfin let out a purr. "Yes, well done, Mintpaw!" She stepped forward and licked her son on the ear.

Mintpaw shrank back in protest, dropping the vole. "Ew!"

Winterlight chuckled, and Ravenfeather purred, leaning against her. "It must be great to have kits to be proud of and watch grow up." He meowed happily. "I can't wait for ours."

"What?" She blinked and shifted apart from him, staring at him. "Kits?"

Ravenfeather tilted his head. "Yes? We'll have kits someday."

Winterlight hesitated, looking uncomfortable. She shuffled her paws on the ground. "Ravenfeather, I... I don't want kits..."

He stared at her, looking confused. "What?"

"I don't want to be a mother. I'm a warrior. I don't want to be stuck in the nursery with mewling kits." Winterlight's fluffy tail twitched nervously.

"You... You can't be serious?" Ravenfeather's expression was filled with disbelief. "Why wouldn't you want kits? Our kits?"

"Ravenfeather... I love hunting and patrolling for my clan, and I want to devote my life to that." Winterlight meowed quietly.

Ravenfeather stared at her for a moment and didn't speak. His eyes were lit with hurt and disbelief. After a moment, it faded into anger. "Then I guess there's no room in your life for me."

"What?" Winterlight's yellow eyes lit with alarm. "No!" Ravenfeather turned away, and she started toward him. "Ravenfeather, I'm sorry-"

The black warrior spun to face her, his amber eyes flaring with anger. "Forget it!" He snarled. "Enjoy being nothing but a warrior with no descendants. I just wish you'd told me this before I wasted any time with you." With that, he raced away.

They were left in silence. Mudslip, Petalfin, and Mintpaw were speechless. Iceslide stared after Ravenfeather, anger pulsing through him. *How dare he?!*

Winterlight stared after her former mate, her eyes lit with shock and pain. "I..."

He shot to his sister's side and pressed his side against hers. "Winterlight... I'm so sorry." She rested against him, and he licked her ear. "You deserve better than that piece of fox dung anyway."

"We should get back to camp," Mudslip meowed quietly, casting her a sympathetic look. "Let's go."

Every cat was silent as they headed back the way they came. Iceslide padded close to his sister. "I thought he'd understand..." Winterlight whispered, staring at the ground. "I loved him..."

Iceslide's heart ached. He wrapped his tail around her back. "I'm sorry," He murmured. "You'll find someone better. It'll be okay." *Ravenfeather seemed like such a good cat.* He thought, shocked at what he'd said to Winterlight. *How could he do this to her?*

Chapter 11

[image]

A few days had passed. Iceslide padded into camp with Creekleap and Lakesong by his side. The three warriors had just returned from hunting. They deposited their fish on the fresh kill pile.

"That was a good catch, Iceslide," Lakesong praised. "You're becoming a much better hunter."

Iceslide dipped his head to the older she-cat, a little annoyed that she would point out his formerly poor hunting skills.

"Not bad," Creekleap purred, his golden striped tail high in the air. "We should have a hunting competition sometime."

He snorted in amusement. *I'd definitely lose. Creekleap is a great hunter.* He suddenly noticed a group of cats sitting near the nursery, watching the den. Creekleap's sister, Lilynose, was among them. She turned and spotted them, brightening. "Hey!" She quickly approached them, looking excited.

"What's going on?" Iceslide asked, looking past her at the nursery.

"Swanpool has begun kitting," Lilynose informed him, her eyes glowing. "Isn't that great?"

I guess so. Iceslide didn't know what to say. To his relief, Lakesong jumped in. "It's wonderful news!" She purred, waving her fluffy silver and white tail. "I wish I'd had kits, but I never met the right cat."

Maybe you would if you looked outside of RiverClan. Iceslide thought, remembering his conversation with Sunripple a few nights ago. *But because of the rules of the warrior code, you'll never have the kits you want...* He felt a pang of pity for her. *If only she didn't bind her life to it like so many other warriors. She could be happier.*

He saw many couples around the camp. Outside the leader's den, Shimmerstar and Salmonstripe were laying together, watching the clan contently. Near them, Mudslip and Vixenwhisper were watching their kits, Warmpaw and Duckpaw, train with their mentors.

The cats who managed to find love in RiverClan are lucky. Iceslide thought.

Dipfoot and Shallowpool sat together, purring. Beyond them, Shorestep watched with a cold look on her face. She snorted and lashed her tail as she stood and walked away. Iceslide remembered that Shorestep and Dipfoot had been mates when he'd been an apprentice. They were the parents of Coralshine and Perchstripe. He wasn't sure what had happened between the couple, but they were no longer mates. Dipfoot had moved on to Shallowpool.

Iceslide spotted his sister, and his heart clouded with sadness. Winterlight was laying at the edge of the camp with her chin on her paws. Her yellow eyes were fixed on the ground.

She's still upset over Ravenfeather. He thought. He picked up the fish he'd caught by its tail and padded over to her. "Hey," He dropped the fish at her paws and nudged it toward her with his nose. "Are you hungry?"

She closed her eyes. "I don't have an appetite."

His heart sunk. *She's always been so happy and positive!* He laid down beside her and curled his tail around himself. He looked around the camp. Many cats were gathered, looking at the nursery, awaiting the arrival of Swanpool's kits.

Frostedcloud sat outside the nursery, his tail twitching nervously. At last, Maplesky and Otterpelt stepped out of the den.

"Congratulations, Frostedcloud," Maplesky purred. "You have two daughters and a son."

The deputies ears perked up with eagerness. "Really? Can I-" The medicine cat nodded, and Frostedcloud rushed past him into the

nursery. Maplesky purred and headed toward the medicine den, Otterpelt closely following.

Many cats had watched Frostedcloud rush into the den. Dipfoot He purred in amusement from where he sat with Shallowpool. "I've never seen that deputy so carefree."

Whitedapple let out a purr. "My brother could use a break from his responsibilities. Every father gets excited about his kits."

Beside her, Shadepath sighed. The elder's green eyes were dull with sadness. "Dewwhisker loved kits," She murmured. "If only he were here to see them. Frostedcloud was his younger brother, after all."

Just yesterday, Dewwhisker had died of old age. The spotted old tom had grown weaker and weaker, and there was nothing the medicine cats could do. He had died peacefully in his sleep. His denmate, Shadepath, was deeply saddened by the loss of her friend.

Whitedapple shifted closer to the elder and wrapped her tail around her. "I'm sure he's watching them from StarClan," She murmured.

Iceslide looked beside him at Winterlight. She hadn't touched the fish he'd given her. "Come on," He meowed quietly. "You need to eat." She turned away.

"Is she okay?"

He looked up to see their brother, Blizzardfur, padding up to them, his blue eyes round with concern. Iceslide shook his head. "She won't eat."

Not far from them, Perchstripe scowled from where he sat watching the nursery. "Kits are gross!"

Petalfin gently nudged him. "Don't be silly! Kits are the life of the clan. If there are no kits, there's no future."

Winterlight heard this and flattened her ears, letting out a sigh. Iceslide and Blizzardfur exchanged a sad look. *She didn't need to hear that.*

"Why don't we go fishing?" Blizzardfur suggested. "Just the three of us."

"Good idea." Iceslide meowed brightly, nudging his sister. "You love hunting! I could use some advice. Have you seen my sloppy skills?"

She seemed to force a small purr. "I guess." She twitched a tufted ear. "I wouldn't mind getting away from camp."

"Okay." Iceslide stood up, and she slowly did the same, her fluffy yellow tail drooping. "Let's go."

***

The three siblings padded alongside the river. It was quiet, and no cat seemed to know what to say. Winterlight looked distant, and Iceslide knew that she must be thinking about Ravenfeather. *We can't just leave her alone with those dark thoughts.* He told himself.

"It's funny how things change as you grow up," Iceslide commented, looking at the rippling water. "Remember how huge the river seemed when we were first made apprentices?"

Winterlight's eyes flickered with amusement. "We couldn't believe any cat could swim across it."

"What about when Iceslide fell into the river?" Blizzardfur chuckled and looked at Iceslide, his pale blue eyes gleaming. "Our mentors were training us, and you got so distracted looking at SkyClan territory, you stumbled right in."

Iceslide let out a purr, curling his tail. "Frozenripple couldn't believe I'd managed to walk into a river! I was so embarrassed. You two didn't leave me alone about it for moons."

"How could we?" Blizzardfur purred. "Frozenripple and Shallowpool had to fish you out before you were carried away! We didn't know how to swim yet."

"And then Frozenripple said, 'I've never caught an Icepaw-fish before'!" Winterlight added, purring with amusement, and the three warriors laughed together.

Iceslide noticed that Winterlight looked a bit happier. Hopefully we can keep her spirits up. He paused and crouched by the edge of the grass. "Let's catch some fish," He suggested.

"Are you going to fall in again?" Blizzardfur chuckled and crouched beside him, nudging him playfully. "Me and Winterlight don't want to have to fish you out."

"I'll try not to." Iceslide purred and turned to Winterlight, who joined them more slowly. "Show us how it's done."

The dark gray and yellow she-cat hesitated, studying the water. "Be patient," She meowed quietly.

Iceslide saw several fish swimming past them. But to his surprise, she didn't move, and watched them silently. He and Blizzardfur exchanged a look. *Is she too upset to catch anything?*

He was about to say something to her when she lashed a forepaw into the water and hooked out a huge trout onto the grass. Iceslide and Blizzardfur watched, impressed as she bit the flopping creature, and it went limp.

"Wow!" Iceslide exclaimed. "That's a great catch!"

Blizzardfur nodded, letting out a purr. "That's big enough to feed three cats!"

Their sister let out a purr. "It's nothing. If you go for the little ones, you scare away all the big ones. If you're patient, they'll come along."

"You're the best hunter in RiverClan," Iceslide purred. "We're lucky to have you."

Winterlight purred, but the light faded from her eyes as she looked down. "Ravenfeather's a great hunter too."

As Iceslide hesitated, his brother responded. "Maybe. But he's not a great cat like you."

"Or as great a hunter," Iceslide added.

She sat up and sighed, dropping her gaze. "He won't even talk to me anymore. He avoids me at all costs."

Iceslide sat beside her. "Then he's a mouse brain," He meowed. "If he can't respect your decisions, then he doesn't deserve to be with a cat like you." He paused. "And you can't let him bring you down."

"That's right," Blizzardfur added. "You're an amazing warrior, one of the very best in the clan. You can't let Ravenfeather get in the way of that. You might even find a new mate, a better one."

Winterlight closed her eyes. "Maybe..." She opened them and turned to her brothers. "It's hard to lose him, but I think you're right... I want to be the best warrior I can be, and I can't let him stop me. It'll take time, but... I can move on."

Blizzardfur purred and licked her fluffy cheek. "That's the spirit."

She let out a purr. "Thank you," She leaned on Blizzardfur and wrapped her fluffy tail around Iceslide. "You're the best brothers any cat could ask for."

He purred and rested his chin on her head. "Of course. We're family, and that means we're always there for you." *I'll never let anything happen to my family.* He thought. *I'd give my life for them.*

Allegiance Update #3

RiverClan

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Warmpaw

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Newtpaw

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Apprentice, Mintpaw

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Apprentice, Duckpaw

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Lilynose - White she-cat with pale tortoiseshell splashes, pale green eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale

blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Fintail - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Apprentices

Newtpaw - Thin black and brown tabby tom with a red striped tail, amber eyes.

Warmpaw - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckpaw - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Willowpaw - Silver and white she-cat with blue eyes.

Darkpaw - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintpaw - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Queens

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes. Mother to Frostedcloud's kits:

Arctickit - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovekit- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingkit - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Elders

Shadepath - Dark gray she-cat with a striped tail and white muzzle, dark green eyes.

ShadowClan

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Milkpaw

Sparrowflight - brown and ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Apprentice, Cougarpaw

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Apprentice, Maplepaw

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cliffpaw

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Rosepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentices

Cougarpaw - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffpaw - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Maplepaw - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosepaw - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkpaw - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Queens

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Buzzardglare's kits:

Poppykit - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Cobrakit - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Carrottail's kits.

Elders

Vulturewing - Big black and dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Twigleaf - Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

ThunderClan

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Apprentice, Vanillapaw

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Breezepaw

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes, yellow eyes.

WindClan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

SkyClan

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 12

[image]

Mottled silver clouds stretched across the pale sky, blotting out the sun. Iceslide sat near the edge of the camp, his tail swishing back and forth along the ground. *I can't take it...* He thought, looking toward twolegplace anxiously. *I need to get there and see Violet again!*

There were a lot of cats in the camp right now. It was midday, and many cats were eating together or deep in conversation. Vixenwhisper and Mudslip were grooming each other, while Shimmerstar and Salmonstripe spoke together and purred.

Heartsong and Coralshine were speaking to each other and chuckling. A blur of golden fur flashed past him, and Iceslide watched as Creekleap padded up to them, purring loudly with his tail in the air. He was holding a fish in his mouth.

"Hey, Heartsong!" Creekleap purred and dropped the fish at her paws. "This is for you."

The silver and white she-cat looked amused. "Oh? What for?"

"For being such a great cat." The young warrior's eyes gleamed. "I'll catch all the fish in the river for you if you like."

Heartsong tilted her head. "Really?"

"Really." Creekleap began to back away. "But you'll have to catch me first!" He spun and raced out of camp, and Heartsong laughed and bounded after him. Coralshine watched them go and shook her head, looking amused.

All the couples around camp sure aren't helping. Iceslide began to feel lonely. *I wish I were with Violet.* He scanned the camp. He saw no sign of Frostedcloud. He guessed that the clan deputy was visiting Swanpool and his kits in the nursery. They had named them Arctickit, Dovekit, and Risingkit, and Frostedcloud seemed to spend

every free moment he had with them.

Maybe I can slip away now... No cat seemed as interested in him as the deputy. *He might not even notice I'm gone.* He looked around. No cat was paying any attention to him. But he decided that he needed some cat to cover for him if anyone noticed he was gone. And he knew just the cat he could trust.

He padded around the camp, searching the cats for his new friend. At last, he spotted Sunripple's golden striped pelt. He was crouched by the fresh kill pile, eating a mouse. Iceslide quickly padded over to him and crouched beside him. "Sunripple," He whispered.

Sunripple swallowed what he'd been chewing and looked to him. "Yeah?"

He glanced around to make sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop. "I'm going to twolegplace for a bit," He meowed quietly. "Will you cover for me if any cat notices I'm gone?"

Sunripple hesitated, then nodded. "Sure. I'll say you went hunting on your own." He paused. "Just make sure you bring back some fresh kill so no one gets suspicious."

"I will." Iceslide nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Sunripple." He looked around and hurried behind the apprentices den where the secret way out was. He slipped through the reeds and ran forward a few fox-lengths from the camp. He paused and stared out into the distance. *I'm coming, Violet!*

"Iceslide?"

He nearly jumped out of his fur. He spun around, his fur bristling with alarm. Lilynose stood a little ways behind him, looking at him curiously. "Where are you going?"

"H-hi, Lilynose," Iceslide tried to sound calm, but he was terrified she would give him away. "I was going hunting."

Lilynose tilted her white head. "Then why didn't you go out the main entrance? It looks like you're sneaking out of camp," She meowed quietly.

Oh, StarClan! His mind searched desperately for an excuse. *Think, think!*

"What are you up to, Iceslide?" She asked, padding closer. She didn't sound like she was accusing him of anything. She only seemed curious and confused.

I don't think there's any way out of this. Iceslide thought, his heart pounding nervously. *I'll tell her the truth. She seems to like me... Maybe she won't tell on me.* He took a step closer to her. "Lilynose, we're friends, aren't we?" He knew that was a lie. At least, to him it was.

She let out a purr, tilting her head. "Of course."

"Well, you're one of my closest friends." He felt guilty for lying. But it was the only way he might be able to get her on his side. "If I wasn't able to see you for over a moon, I'd be devastated."

Lilynose's pale green eyes flashed with surprise and happiness. "R-really?" She whispered hopefully.

"Yeah, of course," Iceslide replied and looked past her happy gaze toward the camp, worried that some cat would see them. "Well, I have some other close friends too," He meowed quietly, growing more and more nervous. "I haven't seen them in that long, and I miss them a lot."

Her eyes flickered with understanding. "Kittypets?" She guessed. "The ones Frostedcloud caught you with?"

"Yes." Iceslide saw her look over her shoulder toward the camp, and he quickly stepped closer to her. "I need to get there," He meowed anxiously. "I need to go to twolegplace to see my friends."

Lilynose hesitated, her pale tortoiseshell splashed tail twitching slowly. "Iceslide, you shouldn't... You're not allowed to." She looked back toward the camp. "When Shimmerstar finds out, she's going to be upset."

He tensed and stared at her uneasily. "Are you going to tell her?" As Lilynose hesitated, his stomach twisted. *I might have been stupid to*

think she'd lie to the clan leader, who also happens to be her own mother!

She stared at him, her gaze softening. "I'd never tell on you, Iceslide," She meowed at last. "You mean a lot to me."

That's a relief! Iceslide let out a sigh, his fur slowly flattening. "Thank you." He hesitated, studying her. *No cat knows what it's like for me and Sunripple... Maybe If she sees, I can make her understand...* "Do you want to come with me?" He asked hesitantly.

Her eyes widened. "What? To twolegplace?" She stared at him like he was crazy.

"Yeah!" He stared at her hopefully. "You can meet my friends."

"Y-you mean the kittypets?" Lilynose blinked. "I've never met a kittypet."

"That's because you've spent your whole life here with RiverClan!" Iceslide pointed out. "There's a whole world out there of new things to see and cats to meet. The warrior code keeps us from having that kind of excitement in our lives." He stared at her, wondering if he could persuade her. "Come with me."

Lilynose stared back at him uncertainly. "I-I don't know..." She shuffled her paws.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Iceslide urged. "It'll be an adventure."

"Well..." She hesitated for a long moment. "Okay," She decided, looking at Iceslide fondly. "I'll go with you."

Iceslide let out a purr. "Great!" He turned and waved his tail eagerly. "Let's go!" She purred and hurried after him, and they broke into a run as they raced across the territory. He couldn't contain his excitement as his paws carried him closer and closer to twolegplace. *I'm finally going to see Violet again!*

***

The sky was peering through the clouds when they reached

twolegplace. They padded alongside the fence. They were getting closer to the yard where Juicy lived. He could cut through there to reach Violet's home.

Lilynose followed him, staring at the fence. "I've never been this close to one of those..."

He looked back at her in amusement. "Well, we're going to get even closer." He ducked through a gap in the wooden planks. "Come on." Lilynose slowly followed him, and Iceslide looked around the yard, perking up.

Sure enough, Juicy was laying on his lawnchair, his head rested on his white paws. When he saw them, his head shot up, his yellow eyes widening. "Iceslide!" He leaped down clumsily from the chair and padded over to him. "It's you!"

"Hi, Juicy!" He purred and stepped forward to bump heads with the orange and white tom. "It's so good to see you again!"

The kittypet purred and stepped back, sitting down and staring at him happily. "Where have you been? We've all been quite worried."

"Iceslide? Is that you?"

He turned to see Parrot bounding up to him from across the yard. The young tortoiseshell tom's eyes beamed with excitement. "Iceslide!" He tackled him, and Lilynose shrank back, her eyes wide with unease.

"Get off, you fluffball!" Iceslide purred and gently pushed Parrot away.

"We've missed you!" Parrot exclaimed. "We thought you got into some big wild cat fight or something!"

Iceslide purred. "I'm okay, I just wasn't allowed to leave RiverClan territory for a while." *I'm still not.* He silently added.

"I'm just glad you're back." Parrot looked past Iceslide. "Who's that?"

He turned and saw that Lilynose had taken several steps back. She was staring at the kittypets nervously.

"It's okay," He meowed to her, wondering why she would be afraid of two harmless kittypets. As she slowly padded forward, he turned to them. "This is Lilynose, one of my clanmates."

"Ah," Juicy's eyes gleamed. "Someone special?" Parrot chuckled beside him.

Lilynose seemed embarrassed, looking at Iceslide shyly. "Oh, no," He replied quickly, amused. "She's just a friend." Her tail drooped, but he didn't notice.

"Well, any friend of Iceslide's is a friend of mine," Juicy purred. "Your nose is pink as a lily. I guess that's why they call you that. I'm Juicy."

"Yes," Lilynose purred dryly, sounding uncomfortable. "Nice to meet you."

Parrot waved his tail at her. "And I'm Parrot!"

"Hey, I just had some tuna." Juicy flicked his orange tail behind him toward his bowl. "There's still some left if you want any."

Iceslide brightened. "Yes, please!" He padded over and crouched, eagerly digging into the tasty bowl of meat. After a moment, he looked past him at Lilynose, swiping his tongue over his muzzle. "Come try it!"

She stepped back, blinking at him. "Uh, no thanks..."

"Suit yourself," Iceslide purred. "More for me then." When he finished, he looked at Juicy. "We're on our way to Violet's," He explained. "I'm sorry, but we need to get going."

Juicy nodded, and Parrot perked up. "We'll go with you!"

He hesitated. *I really wanted to see Violet alone...* But he figured since Lilynose was already there, Juicy and Parrot might as well come too. "Alright, let's go."

They hurried along the side of the twoleg nest, and Lilynose quickly joined them, staying close to Iceslide. "We're going deeper into twolegplace?" She gasped.

"Yeah," Iceslide replied as they neared a small thunderpath. "Don't worry, Violet's place isn't that far."

They crossed the thunderpath, and Lilynose looked around anxiously before turning back to Iceslide. "Who's Violet?"

"A great cat," Iceslide meowed as they hurried along the sidewalk. "You'll like her." His heart pounded with excitement as they ran between two twoleg nests and into Violet's yard. He looked around, desperate to catch a glimpse of her beautiful tortoiseshell fur.

Juicy sniffed at the grass. "I'm sure she's around here somewhere."

"Violet!" Iceslide called as they padded further into the yard. A large blue pit filled with water took up most of the area. Violet had explained to him that it was called a "pool". Twolegs liked to swim in it. "Violet?" His eyes darted around.

"She must be locked inside," Juicy guessed. "I'll go try to find her." He turned to Iceslide. "You stay here. We can surprise her," He purred and padded away.

Iceslide nodded and sat down in the short grass, his tail twitching impatiently. Lilynose and Parrot were silent. Suddenly, the kittypet spoke. "I know what we can do in the meantime!"

"What?" He blinked, distracted by thoughts of Violet. Lilynose jumped a little, seeming wary of the hyper kittypet.

Parrot's green eyes gleamed. "You say clan cats swim, right?"

"Just RiverClan cats," Iceslide reminded him. "Why?"

"I've never seen a cat swim before." Parrot looked over at the twoleg pool. "I dare you to jump in the pool!" He laughed.

Iceslide shot him an amused look. "Are you serious?"

"Yes!" Parrot stared at him eagerly. "Do it! I wanna see!"

He chuckled and raised his tail. "No problem!" He headed toward the pool and studied it. The water looked very different from the river. It was crystal clear, and it's ripples gleamed as they reflected the sunlight.

Parrot hurried to the side of the pool, his eyes shining. "Oh, boy!" Lilynose followed more slowly, staring at Iceslide warily.

He took several fox-lengths backwards and crouched, looking at Parrot. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

Here it goes! Iceslide ran toward the pool. When he reached the edge, he sprang into the air and curled into a ball as he plummeted down toward the water. Water splashed around him as he broke through the surface, and his head went under before he resurfaced, beginning to swim around the pool with his chin just above the surface.

"Whoa!" Parrot bounced up and down, staring at Iceslide in amazement as he swam in circles around the pool. "Look at that! It's a catfish!" His eyes lit with excitement. "I can't believe it, a swimming cat!"

Iceslide chuckled as he swam toward the edge of the pool and reached to pull himself onto the hard ledge. He couldn't get a grip, and Lilynose quickly bounded forward and grabbed him by the scruff, pulling him up.

"Thanks," He meowed and shook out his fur. Lilynose shrank back as she got splattered in water droplets. "Oh, sorry!"

Lilynose shivered. "I-It's fine."

"Wow!" Parrot raced up to Iceslide, his eyes glowing. "That's awesome! Can you teach me how to swim? Please!"

Iceslide laughed. "I-"

"Oh, Iceslide!" Juicy called, and Iceslide jerked around to see the tom racing toward him. "Look who I found!"

"Iceslide?" He heard the familiar jingle from the bell of her collar and saw her bounding toward him behind Juicy, her blue eyes lit with joy.

"Violet!" Iceslide bounded forward to meet her, and they pressed together, nuzzling each other. He pressed his nose into her soft fur, a purr rumbling loudly in his throat as his heart raced with happiness. "I've missed you so much!"

"I've missed you too!" Violet purred loudly and began licking his face. He heard Parrot chuckling at them teasingly, but he didn't care. *I'm with Violet, and that's all that matters!* She shifted back and stared at him anxiously. "Where have you been? I-I thought maybe you didn't like me anymore..."

His heart ached. "Of course I like you!" He nuzzled her. "I love you."

Violet let out a loud purr. "I love you too."

They shifted apart, and Iceslide turned toward Lilynose. "This is-" He broke off. His clanmate seemed frozen, staring at him and Violet with a anguished look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"Hello," Violet meowed, sounding friendly. "Who are you?"

Lilynose swallowed and stepped back, her eyes lit with pain. "No one that matters." She spun around and raced out of the yard, her white tail streaking behind her.

What happened? "Lilynose?" Iceslide blinked and started toward her, looking back at his companions. "I-I've got to go." He quickly touched noses with Violet before racing after Lilynose, feeling confused. *I don't understand. What got her so upset?*

He caught up to her in the front yard of the nest. She was standing with her back to him, her tail drooping. "Lilynose?" He blinked. "Are you okay?"

"No!" She choked and turned to face him, her usually happy green

eyes filled with pain and anger. "I can't believe you! Eating kittypet food, jumping into some twoleg pool!" Her tail began to lash angrily as she glared at him. "You're crazy!"

Iceslide flattened his ears. "You don't under-"

"No, I don't!" Lilynose snarled at him. "I don't understand any of it! I don't understand how you can love a kittypet!" She trembled, her eyes glistening with pain. "Maybe if you'd keep your nose in your clan instead of everywhere else, you'd see that I love you!"

What? He was startled. *Winterlight was right..!* Before he could say anything, she went on. "All I've ever tried to do was be there for you and help you!" She cried. "I know you hate having me around, I see how you act. But you seemed different from everyone else, and-" She broke off and whimpered. "I just wanted to help you!"

He'd never felt so guilty. His heart ached as he stepped toward her. "I-I'm sorry-"

"Forget it, Iceslide!" Lilynose snapped shakily and backed away, glaring at him. "I just want to go home and away from this StarClan forsaken place!" She spun and raced onto the thunderpath.

Iceslide hurried after her. "Lilynose, wait!" He called. "I-I just wanted you to see what it's like outside the warrior code." His heart pounded with anxiety. *She's going to tell Shimmerstar when we get back to camp! I have to change her mind!*

She paused in the middle of the thunderpath and turned to face him. "The warrior code is meant to be followed!" She yowled, her voice cracking in heartache. "You're breaking it in every way!"

He knew that he had broken much more than the code today. He'd never seen Lilynose so furious and upset. "Lily-" Something moved in the corner of his eye, and he snapped his attention to it, his heart jolting in alarm. A twoleg monster was charging toward them, already alarmingly close to them. They'd been so focused on their argument, they hadn't heard it coming. Lilynose had her back to the monster as she glared at him.

He immediately stepped backwards, flashing his gaze to Lilynose in alarm. "Look-" He began in a yowl.

But Lilynose didn't move, her eyes blazing with fury. Her focus was entirely on Iceslide. She let out a furious snarl. "No, *you* look-"

The monster thundered at her, striking her with a huge black paw. Iceslide jerked back, squeezing his eyes shut as he heard a sickening crunching noise just faintly below the roar of the monster. When it went quiet, he snapped open his eyes and let out a horrified screech. "NO!"

Lilynose lay motionless on the thunderpath. He forced his paws shakily toward her, his heart pounding rapidly in terror. "Lilynose!" He leaned over her and let out a horrified cry. Blood had begun pooling from her head. Her pale green eyes were glazed over and sightless. Her shoulder and ribs looked strange, and Iceslide was sure she must have broken bones.

"No..." Iceslide croaked, his heart throbbing with grief. He crouched and rested his chin on her shoulder, trembling with shock and distress. "I'm so sorry..!" *It's my fault..! It's all my fault...*

***

It was sunset by the time he reached the camp. Juicy and Violet had helped him carry Lilynose's body until they'd reached RiverClan territory. From there, he took her alone on his back. He padded into the camp slowly.

Several cats were settled in the clearing, eating or talking to one another. When Iceslide arrived with Lilynose's body, the cats let out shocked gasps and cries.

"Lilynose!" Petalfin gasped.

"Oh no!"

"What happened?"

Iceslide rested Lilynose's body in the center of the camp and stepped back, hanging his head.

"Lilynose!" Shimmerstar let out a shriek from where she was sitting with Salmonstripe. The two cats ran to their daughter. "No!" She let out a wail of grief, crouching and pressing her nose into Lilynose's fur. Salmonstripe pressed against Shimmerstar, his eyes lit with grief.

Creekleap slowly padded over, his yellow eyes wide. "She... She's dead..?" He slowly crouched beside his sister, hanging his head. The clan circled the body, murmuring and wailing.

After a long moment, Shimmerstar stood, swallowing and looking at Iceslide. He could tell she was struggling to look strong in front of her clan. "How did this happen?" She rasped. Salmonstripe, Creekleap, and the rest of the clan looked at him anxiously.

"She..." Iceslide felt numb. "She was hit by a monster." He waited for someone to ask where this happened, as the nearest thunderpaths were in twolegplace or on the border of ThunderClan and ShadowClan. But the clan seemed to shocked to think about this.

Shimmerstar sighed and licked Lilynose's forehead. "Oh, Lilynose," She whispered. "What will I do without you?" Creekleap shifted closer to his mother, and she pulled him close. Maplesky and Otterpelt sat near the family, waiting quietly to prepare her body for the vigil.

Iceslide was exhausted and numb with grief. But he wasn't going to sleep. He owed Lilynose his respect. He would stay awake all night with her body. He stared at her, his heart breaking. *It's all my fault... I'm so sorry, Lilynose...*

Chapter 13

[image]

Snow drifted onto the cold ground, sprinkling the earth with white. Leaf-bare had arrived. Iceslide sat near the reed bed, watching the flurries fall to the ground. It had been a quarter moon since Lilynose's death. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her, or shake the feeling of guilt weighing him down like a stone. *It's my fault she died...*

Shimmerstar and Salmonstripe were still recovering from the loss of their daughter. As leader, Shimmerstar had to remain strong in front of the clan, and she often did a good job of hiding her grief. But sometimes Iceslide saw her laying by her den, staring at the cats in the clearing with a numb look on her face. And he understood why. A cat was missing. One of the most important cats in her life. Her own kit. When it became too much to bear, Salmonstripe would gently guide her into her den, and they would talk for a while. They also spent more time with their remaining kit, Creekleap. Iceslide could see the desperation in Shimmerstar's eyes whenever she looked at her son, afraid of losing him too.

The golden tabby tom was sitting at the side of the clearing now, looking at his paws. Heartsong sat beside him, murmuring to him. The loss of his sister had effected Creekleap deeply. The usually funny and playful warrior was very sad and quiet these days. He joined hunting patrols often, but around camp, he would sit around trapped in his grief. The only cat able to cheer him up sometimes was Heartsong. The silver and white she-cat spent as much time as she could with Creekleap, trying to take his mind off of Lilynose.

Heartsong pressed her head against his shoulder, and Creekleap looked at her, letting out a small purr.

Swanpool's kits were peering out of the nursery, their eyes wide as they watched the snow.

"Wow!" Dovekit gasped, staring out into the clearing. "What is that

stuff?"

Their mother and leaned over her, licking her head. "That's called snow," She purred. "It comes every leaf-bare."

Arctickit tilted his head as he studied the snow on the ground. "Snow?" He cautiously stepped out of the den, hesitantly stretching out a tiny white paw and dabbing the frosty earth. A snowflake fell onto his nose, and he let out a startled squeak, scrambling back into the den. "It's attacking me!"

His sisters looked at him in alarm. "Is it dangerous?" Risingkit gasped as Arctickit rubbed his nose with his paw.

Swanpool chuckled. "Not at all, dears," She assured, gently nuzzling Arctickit. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's a bit like rain."

"Ooh!" Risingkit stepped out and dabbed at a falling snowflake, and the other kits slowly joined her, fascinated by the flurries.

Lilynose loved kits. Iceslide thought as she watched them. *She wanted to have kits... Probably with me. But I never would have let that happen.* He felt a pang of guilt. *I didn't know I was hurting her so badly.*

"Iceslide."

He flicked his ear and turned to see Blizzardfur padding up to him, his thick fur covered in snowflakes that could hardly be seen against his mottled white and pale silver pelt. He sat beside Iceslide and looked at him as he wrapped his fluffy tail around himself. "Are you okay?" He asked quietly.

Iceslide sighed. "I don't know."

"Lilynose?" Blizzardfur guessed. He nodded, and his brother looked at him sympathetically. "It wasn't your fault, Iceslide," He meowed quietly.

"Yes it is." Iceslide closed his eyes. "I never should have taken her to twolegplace." Blizzardfur and Sunripple were the only cats who knew the details about Lilynose's death and where they'd been. Any other cat would have been furious if they knew Iceslide's

twolegplace adventures had gotten Lilynose killed. He expected that Shimmerstar would have driven him out of the clan immediately.

Blizzardfur shook his head. "You couldn't have known what was going to happen." He paused, glancing around. "You shouldn't go there anymore," He meowed quietly. "I don't know why you would after Frostedcloud caught you last time."

He felt a flash of annoyance. "You don't understand," He muttered. *My friends and the cat I love are there...* He saw movement from the corner of his eye and turned to see a hunting patrol returning to camp. Dipfoot and Divetail were in the lead, each carrying a small fish. Frostedcloud padded over to greet them.

Dipfoot dropped his fish on the fresh kill pile before looking up at the deputy. "We caught as much as we could," He meowed, shaking snowflakes from his whiskers. "Divetail thought it would be best to stay by the river."

Frostedcloud nodded approval. "Good thinking," He meowed. "We won't be able to fish anymore once the river freezes over." He glanced up at the falling snow with a look of annoyance on his face. "And it looks like leaf-bare is arriving early."

"Yes, and-" Dipfoot broke off as Divetail tossed a pawful of snow at his head. He shook snow from his face and glared at his brother. "Hey!"

Divetail chuckled, twitching his dark gray tail. His blue eyes gleamed with amusement. "Come on, let's have some fun!"

"You'll pay for that!" Dipfoot growled playfully and charged after him, and the two brothers darted across the camp, their paws skidding across the snow.

Shadepath watched from outside the elder's den, shaking her head in amusement. "Those two have been playing around like fools since they were kits!"

Blizzardfur purred and looked at Iceslide. "The river will be freezing over soon," He meowed. "Remember when we were apprentices,

we'd slide on the ice together? You loved it more than all of us." His blue eyes gleamed with amusement. "I still can't believe Shimmerstar gave you that name because of it." He purred at Iceslide, but he wasn't phased. "Come on, Iceslide," He said quietly. "What could you feel guilty about? You did nothing wrong."

"I should have realized how she felt about me," Iceslide meowed quietly. "I don't know how I could have been so blind."

"Would it have made a difference?" Blizzardfur asked. "You didn't love her back. What were you supposed to do?"

He thought about this and searched for an answer. *I couldn't have been her mate... Not when I didn't love her. But I could have respected her more.* He felt a pang of guilt as he remembered all the times he'd been annoyed by her presence and tried to push her away. *She was one of the only cats in RiverClan that liked me, and I treated her like green-cough for it.* He sighed and looked at his paws. "Something..."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!"

They turned to see that Shimmerstar had leaped onto the rock by the side of the clearing. The clan slowly began gathering.

"Come on," Blizzardfur waved his fluffy tail, and he and Iceslide padded forward to settle with the others below the rock. Frozenripple and Petalfin settled close together, looking up at their leader. Creekleap and Heartsong weren't far from them. Salmonstripe dipped his head to his son before sitting beside him.

Dipfoot and Divetail had abandoned their play fight and settled at the back of the crowd. "I would have gotten you eventually," Dipfoot purred as Cherryberry joined them.

Otterpelt and Maplesky sat together outside the medicine den, watching Shimmerstar contently.

"Nah, you're too slow." Divetail nudged him.

Cherryberry gently cuffed Divetail over the ear. "Mouse-brain."

Iceslide looked past Shorestep and Lakesong to the front of the crowd. He saw that the three oldest apprentices, Newtpaw, Warmpaw, and Duckpaw were standing below the meeting rock, looking excited. Their mentors, Whitedapple, Grayshadow, and Troutspots stood to the side, watching them proudly. *Shimmerstar must be holding their warrior ceremony now.* He thought.

Winterlight purred a greeting to her brothers before sitting beside Iceslide, looking up at Shimmerstar brightly. "I wonder if I'll ever get an apprentice?"

"I'm sure you will," Blizzardfur purred. "You'd make any cat a master at fishing."

Iceslide was glad to see his sister back to her usual self. It had taken some time, but she'd gotten over Ravenfeather. She was entirely focused on her duties and seemed determined not to let anything get in the way. He scanned the crowd and spotted the black warrior now. He was sitting toward the front of the crowd beside Heronleg, his attention fixed on Shimmerstar.

Coralshine padded to Blizzardfur, purring and weaving around him. He purred back and rested his chin on her head as he looked up at Shimmerstar.

The leader looked down on her clan, snowflakes falling onto her soft silver dappled pelt. "Cats of RiverClan," She began. "Despite the arrival of leaf-bare, our clan is thriving. Swanpool and Frostedcloud have three fine kits in the nursery." She looked at all the couples among the cats below, her gaze resting on Blizzardfur and Coralshine as she purred. "And I expect there will be many more soon."

Iceslide glanced over at them, letting out a purr. The two cats looked at each other warmly. *I'm happy for him.* He heard a snort and turned his attention to the front of the group.

It had come from Ravenfeather. The black tom's tail was twitching with annoyance. "Pathetic," He grumbled. "Love may be nice and all, but it's all a lie and a distraction. Power is more important than anything." His narrowed amber eyes fixed on Winterlight as he said

this.

Her fur bristled, her eyes flashing with hurt as she stared back at him. Iceslide shifted closer to her. "Ignore him," He growled. "He's trying to upset you." Winterlight hesitated, then nodded, looking down.

If Shimmerstar heard Ravenfeather's comment, she didn't acknowledge it. She went on. "Additionally, we have many apprentices in training. And today, three of them are ready to become warriors." She looked down at the apprentices.

The three young cats stared up at her excitedly. Newtpaw's red striped tail waved back and forth in the air. Duckpaw looked nervous, while Warmpaw stood tall and proud.

Shimmerstar began. "I, Shimmerstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn. " She looked down at them.

Warmpaw was first. She stepped forward and looked up at Shimmerstar, her bright green eyes shining. Not far from the mentors, Mudslip and Vixenwhisper sat together, watching their kits proudly.

"Warmpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?" Shimmerstar meowed.

Warmpaw let out a purr. "I do."

"Then by the powers of , I give you your warrior name. Warmpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Warmmoss. StarClan honors your kindness and skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

"Warmmoss! Warmmoss!" The clan cheered, and the brown and white she-cat lifted her tail happily before she stepped aside and let Newtpaw take her place.

"Newtpaw, do you promise to -"

A yowl of horror rang out from outside the medicine den, and every cat jerked in shock and snapped their attention to it. Otterpelt was crouched outside the den, her red-brown fur bristling and eyes wide as though something had scared her.

Maplesky spun to face his apprentice, bristling. "Otterpelt!" He exclaimed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Otterpelt's yellow eyes were round and lit with terror as she stared at the clan gathered below the meeting rock. "I-I had a vision!" She wailed.

Her mentor looked uneasy. "Otter-"

"What vision?" Shimmerstar stared at the medicine cat. Every cat looked alarmed and wary.

She trembled, looking distant and petrified. "Ev-Everyone's dead!" She cried, her eyes darting from cat to cat. "So many dead! The blood!"

The cats began murmuring anxiously to one another. Blizzardfur and Coralshine exchanged a worried look. "What does she mean?" She whispered to him.

"Are we all going to die?" Fintail gasped out.

Shallowpool stared at the medicine cats. "She's spoken of a vision like this before... Remember?"

"No!" Maplesky looked like he was struggling to stay calm. "There's nothing to worry about. I assure you." He gently nudged Otterpelt, and she stumbled back, looking startled as though she just realized he was there. "Get some rest, Otterpelt."

Shimmerstar stared down at the medicine cats uneasily. After a moment, she focused on the clan again, her fur flattening. "Let's continue with the ceremony," She tried to sound positive, but Iceslide guessed that she was unsettled by Otterpelt's words.

A few cats relaxed, but many exchanged worried and frightened looks.

"They're hiding something," Troutspots murmured in front of Iceslide. "They know something we don't."

Shorestep stared at him. "But what? Is RiverClan doomed?"

"We're going to die," Perchstripe breathed.

As Shimmerstar went on to name Newttail and Duckwing, Iceslide watched the medicine cats curiously.

"Come on, Otterpelt," Maplesky was whispering to his apprentice. "It's going to be okay." He licked her ear.

She stared at him anxiously. "You know it's coming, don't you?" She whimpered. "It's coming, because..." She trailed off, and Iceslide tensed as her eyes rested on him, desperate and afraid.

What does she know? Iceslide wondered in alarm. *And what does it have to do with me? I would never harm my clanmates! I'd never harm anyone!*

Chapter 14

[image]

A thin layer of snow coated the ground. Iceslide padded through it, glancing over his shoulder every so often to make sure no cat saw him. It was snowing lightly. He hoped it would be enough to cover the tracks he was leaving behind with each step. He continued toward twolegplace, snow falling gently onto his pelt.

He knew it was risky going to twolegplace again. But it was the only place where he felt truly relaxed, and that was exactly how he needed to feel. Lilynose's death was still on his mind constantly, and he couldn't shake the guilt that dragged him down like a stone in the river. *I should never have brought her here.* He thought as he padded along the fence. He soon reached the gap in the planks leading into Juicy's yard, and he crouched and slipped inside.

Last time I was here, Lilynose was with me. He thought with a pang on sadness. He padded into the frosty yard and looked around. Juicy wasn't out on the patio like he usually was. He saw that his chair was wet with a thin layer of snow. *Kittypets probably don't like the snow.* He thought. *They want to stay inside where it's warm and dry. Juicy must be in the nest.*

He decided to look for Violet and the other kittypets who might be out. He padded around the side of the nest, crossing the first thunderpath and heading in the direction of Violet's home. His thoughts darkened again. Lilynose wasn't the only thing on his mind. Otterpelt's vision from yesterday was filling his thoughts with unease.

"Everyone's dead! So many dead! The blood!" The medicine cat's words echoed in his mind, frightened and desperate. He began imagining what she could have possibly seen, the camp filled with dead cats, her friends and family, their blood splattering the ground. Such a vision would have been terrifying. *I can't imagine what it would be like to see that.* He shuddered and tried to clear his head as he walked, but the dreaded thoughts took hold of his mind again. He remembered how Otterpelt had stared at him, and a quarter moon ago had begged him not to leave RiverClan territory.

It seems like she thinks I'll cause all of this death she saw. Iceslide thought. *But that's impossible! I would never kill anyone! And leaving RiverClan territory certainly wouldn't change that! I'm-* He stopped in his tracks.

He could see Violet's twoleg nest just ahead, behind another nest. His gaze drifted to the thunderpath and rested on the place where Lilynose had died. He heard a dog barking faintly in the distance, but he didn't move. His eyes stayed fixed on the thunderpath, his heart aching as he remembered how furious and heartbroken she'd been with him. *I wish I'd said something before she died... I wish I could have told her that I appreciated her, even if she wasn't my favorite cat. I-*

The barking grew louder, and Iceslide pricked his ears, looking further down the thunderpath toward a small intersection. He couldn't see anything, but the barking remained frequent. He slowly relaxed. *Relax, mouse-brain! it's not going to come here. Dogs are always tied up in-*

BARK

He froze at an even louder bark and saw a cat appear, racing around the corner of the intersection. Sure enough, a huge black

dog appeared close behind her, barking madly as it charged in pursuit of the cat. Iceslide instinctively spun and raced into the safety of a bush, looking out as the golden and brown she-cat bolted past him. The dog sprinted after her, howling and barking angrily.

That cat had better run! He peered out anxiously. *Hurry!* The she-cat had made a sudden turn, racing between two houses on the opposite side of the thunderpath from where Iceslide was. Clearly she hoped to lose the dog and run somewhere from there, but the dog skidded and scrambled on the frosty road as he ran after her between the houses. The she-cat let out a startled gasp. The gate to the yard was shut. The cat skidded to a halt and spun around, her amber eyes lit with alarm as the dog closed in, head low as he snarled at her.

Run! Iceslide silently willed the cat. *Quick, you can get away!*

The she-cat's eyes darted around as she looked for a way out. She leaped forward in an attempt to race around it and escape, but the dog spun and clamped its jaws down on her front leg.

No!

The golden cat screeched out in pain and tried to pull free, but the dog snarled and twisted it's head, lifting her off the ground and shaking her by her leg before tossing her aside. She hit the wooden gate headfirst and fell into the snow, her eyes wide and stunned. She tried to get to her paws, but collapsed. The dog growled and barked as it paced around her, tail wagging with excitement.
It *wants to play with her. Eventually it's going to kill her! She can't get away!*

I have to do something! Iceslide leaped out of the bush and ran across the thunderpath toward them without thinking. *I can't let another cat die because I did nothing. I can't stand by and watch while this cat gets killed! Not if I can help it!*

"Hey!" He yowled and leaped onto the dog's back without thinking. The dog let out a startled yelp and twisted around madly, trying to shake Iceslide off of it. He gasped and dug his hind claws into the dog's body, trying to fasten his front claws into the dog's collar. The

dog snarled and spun, trying to twist its head backwards and snapping it's jaws at him.

"Run!" He yowled to the she-cat who lay there, staring at him in surprise. "I'll distract it!"

The golden she-cat tried to get up, only to collapse, letting out a grunt of pain and frustration. *She can't run!* He realized in alarm as the dog snarled and barked furiously at Iceslide. *I can't hold on forever!* With a furious snarl, the dog shook Iceslide off of its back. He rolled through the snow and stumbled to his paws, letting out a gasp. *Oh no!*

A growl rumbled deep in the dog's throat, its dark eyes gleaming with excitement. It had lost interest in the golden she-cat, who was struggling to get up. It's tail wagged as it cornered Iceslide against the wall of the twoleg nest. He backed into it and tensed, his fur bristling with fear. The reek of the dog's breath filled his nose as it closed in, teeth bared. *I can't beat it!* He thought in terror. *StarClan, help me!*

The yowling of a twoleg caught his attention. He turned to see a male twoleg running toward them, sounding angry. Iceslide shrank back in fear, but to his relief, he only seemed interested in the dog. *That must be the dog's twoleg.*

The dog started toward Iceslide, but before he could reach him, the twoleg grabbed the dog's collar, yowling at it angrily. The dog flattened it's ears as it was scolded, casting a longing look at Iceslide. The twoleg began dragging the dog away by its collar, and the dog tried to get back to him until they reached the sidewalk, where it gave up and walked calmly alongside the twoleg as though nothing had happened.

Iceslide's heart pounded rapidly. He took a deep breath and sighed in relief, slowly relaxing. *Thank StarClan...* He quickly ran over to the she-cat, looking down at her anxiously. "Are you okay?"

She was a dark golden and brown she-cat with black ears and paws, as well as the tip of her ragged tail. She looked young, very close to his age. She was laying on her stomach against the wooden gate,

breathing quickly. She shot Iceslide a glare. "Leave me alone!" She spat at him, and Iceslide stepped back, startled.

"You're hurt," He meowed, looking at her foreleg. He could see drops of blood in her golden fur and speckled in the snow near the leg. "Can you stand up?"

"Of course I can," She snarled. "Back off, kitty!"

"I just saved your life!" He pointed out, twitching his tail in annoyance. "You could show a bit of respect. I could have died."

She narrowed her amber eyes. "Yet you're standing here meowing at me."

Iceslide snorted. *Why did I help this arrogant fleabag?* But he knew he never would have let her die. The she-cat suddenly let out a growl of pain, and he grew sympathetic and crouched, sniffing at her wound. "It doesn't look too bad, but it must be hard to put weight on." He stood and she glared at him, pain glistening in her eyes. "Let me help you get home," He urged. "I don't think you're well enough to walk."

"I can walk," The she-cat snapped. "I don't need your help!"

"Okay then." Iceslide sat down and looked at her calmly. "Go ahead."

The dark golden cat glared at him sharply and grunted as she stood, trembling. She started forward only to gasp out in pain and collapse into the snow, letting out a hiss. "Fox-dung!"

Despite her rudeness, he couldn't bear to see her in pain. "See?" He stepped toward her. "Come on, let me help you get home," He paused. "Or would you rather stay here and wait for another dog to come along, or a twoleg to scoop you up?"

The she-cat let out a growl of annoyance, but it was clear that she saw no other option than Iceslide's offer. "Fine," She grumbled reluctantly, lashing her tail. "Help me up."

You're welcome. He thought and stepped closer to her, nudging her

up with his muzzle. "Lean on me," He meowed, and she reluctantly did, holding up her wounded leg. "Let's go."

They slowly started to head out toward the sidewalk. Iceslide was about to turn left when she hissed at him. "It's that way, idiot!"

He let out an irritated growl as he changed direction. The golden she-cat rolled her eyes. "I hope no cat sees me. It's shameful enough, needing help from a kittypet!" She spat the word "kittypet".

Iceslide lashed his tail. "I'm not a kittypet," He meowed, trying to keep his fur flat. "I'm a clan cat."

She snorted in amusement as she limped onward against him. "What dung is that?"

"There are five groups of cats. We call them clans," Iceslide explained. "There's ThunderClan, ShadowClan, WindClan, RiverClan, and SkyClan. I'm a warrior of RiverClan."

The she-cat rolled her eyes. "Isn't that lovely? And I suppose you all live in harmony somewhere?" She purred in amusement.

He grew irritated at her scorn. "We all live together in a forest," He growled. "We don't always-"

"A forest?" The golden she-cat stopped, her amber eyes flashing with interest. "Is that so?" When he nodded, she paused, looking thoughtful. "And these clans of yours... Are they big groups?"

"Oh, definitely," Iceslide meowed, surprised by her sudden interest. He assumed she was used to living alone in twolegplace and felt curious a life outside of that. "Each clan is filled with warriors, queens, kits, apprentices..." He let out a purr. "RiverClan is overflowing with cats!"

The she-cat nodded slowly. "I see..." She studied Iceslide as they continued onward. "And what's a RiverClan cat doing here in twolegplace?"

Iceslide hesitated, wondering what she would think of his carefree spirit. "I like to explore," He admitted. "I get away whenever I can to

come here. I've made a lot of friends outside of the clan." He glanced at her. "Perhaps you'll be one of them." Though right now the she-cat seemed like a pain in the tail, maybe they'd end up getting along. "All my life, I've wondered about life outside of RiverClan."

"Ah," The golden and brown she-cat narrowed her eyes. "Curiosity killed the cat."

It hasn't yet. Iceslide dipped his head, amused. He looked ahead as they walked. "How much further?"

"It's on the outskirts of twolegplace," She replied. He was surprised that she seemed more friendly now. "We're almost there." She paused, studying him. "What's your name, forest cat?"

"Iceslide," He replied, and she snorted in amusement.

"What a strange name!" She purred, her eyes gleaming. "Do all you clan cats have funny names like that?"

He lashed his tail in annoyance, but tried to stay calm. "Well, what's your name then?" He demanded.

The golden she-cat looked at him, her amber eyes glittering. "My name is Poisoned Sap."

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The sun was setting by the time they got there. They had reached an old abandoned twoleg nest surrounded by overgrown grass. The door was parted halfway, covered in moss and mold. The concrete steps were broken and cracked.

He stared at the rundown twoleg nest. "You have this whole place to yourself?"

Poisoned Sap purred and shook her head, staggering against him. "Oh no, I live here with my brother and his group of cats. We needed to move here because there was so little prey in the last town we lived in." She twitched her tail. "I think my brother would like to meet you." She nodded toward the nest. "Let's go."

Iceslide hesitated. *I don't want to go in a twoleg nest... But at least this one doesn't have any twolegs in it...* He headed up the cracked steps with Poisoned Sap and through the door.

The scent of many cats immediately filled his nose. Ripped and dusty twoleg furniture lined the walls. It was fairly dark inside, but he looked around and saw that the place was filled with cats. They were resting on the couch, sitting in corners, on shelves and under chairs, their eyes gleaming in the shadows. He guessed there were at least thirty cats here.

He and Poisoned Sap padded further into the room. She continued to lean on him. Several cats noticed them, looking at Iceslide in confusion. "Who's that?" A tom growled.

"I've never seen him before!" A she-cat added from where she lay with three kits. The kits stared at Iceslide nervously, backing up against their mother.

"Poisoned Sap!" A furious snarl rang out from the shadows, making him jump. A tom leaped down from a couch and approached them.

Iceslide let out a startled gasp, his fur standing on end. This was unlike any cat he'd seen before. He was a big broad shouldered black tom with white stripes on his sides. But what had alarmed him was the accessory he wore. A skull was rested over his head, blocking his face from view. Judging by the look of it, Iceslide guessed that it was from a fox, or perhaps even another larger cat. The empty eye sockets of the skull concealed the tom's eyes in shadow, so all that could be seen were the dark black holes.

"Yes, Bone Shred?" Poisoned Sap stumbled against Iceslide as she dipped her head.

The tom stopped in front of her and stared her down with his black gaze. "Why have you brought this cat here?" He snarled, swinging his head to Iceslide, and he froze nervously. "Who is he?"

"I-I-" Iceslide stammered uneasily as the cats stared at him.

Poisonedsap laid down on her stomach, letting out a sigh as she

relaxed her wounded foreleg. "This is Iceslide," She meowed as Bone Shred watched her, tail lashing. "He lives with a large group of cats in a forest not far from here." Her eyes gleamed. A few cats exchanged looks as she said this, while others stepped out from the shadows, staring at Iceslide.

Bone Shred's tail slowly stopped moving. He raised his head slowly. "I see." His black hollow gaze moved to Iceslide. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Iceslide." His voice grew smooth and calm.

"Y-yes..." Iceslide shuffled his paws as he tried to avoid looking at the tom's skull, his fur still ruffled.

The black cat noticed his unease and chuckled. "It's the skull, isn't it? It's meant to frighten enemies, to keep my cats safe." He waved his tail toward the other cats in the room. "It seems to work, given your reaction to me." He sounded amused as he looked at Iceslide.

"Err, I'm sorry," Iceslide meowed, slowly calming. "I've never seen a cat like you."

"And I've never seen a cat like you." Bone Shred tipped his head. "A forest cat. Very interesting."

He looked around at the other cats who sat in the shadows, watching him with interest. "You all live together?" He looked at Bone Shred, recalling the authority he seemed to hold. "You must be the leader?"

"That's right." He nodded. "I give these cats shelter, food, and protection." He raised his head. "My skull and name send fear through any cat who dares threaten them. We try to live in peace."

That's nice. Iceslide thought. *It's a bit like a clan in a way.* "It sounds like a good system," He dipped his head respectfully.

"It is," Poisoned Sap purred from where she lay, licking her foreleg. "Bone Shred is a fine leader."

Bone Shred dipped his head to his sister. "Well done bringing him here, Poisoned Sap," He purred. "I'm glad to have met such a cat." He turned back to Iceslide. "I hope we get along fine."

"I'm sure we will," Iceslide responded politely.

"I'm sorry we can't offer you any prey." Bone Shred dropped his gaze and flicked his tail toward a small pile under an old wooden table. The sight of it made Iceslide feel sick. Four or five small rodents were rested there as well as a couple scraps of twoleg food, flies buzzing around them. "I need to feed my own cats before any guests, and we're hungry enough. Many of us will die in leaf-bare."

Iceslide nodded, looking around at the cats. "Prey must be scarce in twolegplace." His heart ached as he realized how thin the cats were. Most had ribs showing through their dull fur. He saw a very thin elderly tom curled up in a corner, coughing and shivering.

The queen was laying with her chin on her bony paws. Her three thin kits raced over to the tiny fresh kill pile. Two of the kits snatched up a scrawny mouse.

"It's mine!" One of them hissed as he dragged at the mouse.

His sister leaped at him. "No, I want it!" She clawed at him, and Iceslide watched in shock as the two kits fought with tooth and claw over the mouse.

"I want some!" The third kit whimpered and stepped toward them. "I'm hungry!" He tried to sniff the mouse, but his sister turned and raked her claws across his ear. He whimpered and backed away as his siblings began eating the mouse.

The mother of the kits turned and licked him on the head. "I'm sorry, dear," She murmured. "You can eat something tomorrow."

Iceslide's heart broke at the sight of the starving kits. "You're all so hungry," He meowed quietly. "Why don't you all become kittypets? Any twoleg would feel sorry for-"

Several cats hissed in objection to this. "A kittypet!" One tom scowled. "Disgusting!"

"I hate twolegs!" An elderly she-cat spat.

Bone Shred's tail was lashing angrily. "There's nothing more

shameful than surrendering your life to a twoleg!" He spat. "They're cruel, horrible creatures! We would rather die than live among their kind."

"I-I can understand that." Iceslide's tail drooped with sadness. *These poor starving cats... I wish I could do something.* He grew thoughtful. *Maybe I can help...* He looked at Bone Shred. "There's lots of prey in my territory. What if I caught some for you and brought it here?"

The cats exchanged hopeful and surprised looks. "Really?" A weak tom croaked. "You would help us?"

The queen had lifted her head, her yellow eyes hopeful. "All of my kits could have a meal every day!" She looked down at her litter. "Oh, that would be a miracle!"

Bone Shred sat down, studying Iceslide thoughtfully. "You would do that?"

"Of course!" Iceslide meowed, confident in this decision. "I couldn't let any cat starve. I want to help you."

The rogue leader hesitated. "We wouldn't want to cause you any trouble..."

He shook his head. "No trouble at all." He stared at him. "Please, let me help all of you. No cat should have to live like this."

Bone Shred was quiet for a moment. The cats looked at him hopefully. He gave a nod. "Very well. Thank you, Iceslide," He purred. "You're very generous, and you have my deepest gratitude."

"I'll bring some prey for you tomorrow night," Iceslide promised. *I'll have to catch it at night so that the clan doesn't see me.* He thought. *It'll be exhausting, but worth it. I need to help these cats.*

"That sounds great. We look forward to your return," Bone Shred meowed smoothly.

Iceslide dipped his head and turned away. Many cats greeted him on his way out, thanking him for his offer.

"Thank you!" A she-cat purred happily. "You have no idea what this means for us."

"You're a lifesaver!" A tom added, his eyes filled with gratitude.

The three kits scampered up to Iceslide, staring up at him with wide eyes. "Will you catch something for us too?" One of them asked hopefully.

He let out a purr. "Of course! I'll catch you the juiciest mouse I can find." He waved his tail at the cats as he headed for the door. He paused and looked over his shoulder at Poisoned Sap. "Goodbye!" He called.

The golden she-cat purred, her amber eyes glowing in the darkness. "See you soon, Iceslide."

Allegiance Update #4

RiverClan

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Apprentice, Mintpaw

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Fintail - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Newttail - Thin black and brown tabby tom with a red striped tail, amber eyes.

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Apprentices

Willowpaw - Silver and white she-cat with blue eyes.

Darkpaw - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintpaw - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Queens

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes. Mother to Frostedcloud's kits:

Arctickit - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovekit- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingkit - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Elders

Shadepath - Dark gray she-cat with a striped tail and white muzzle, dark green eyes.

ShadowClan

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Milkpaw

Sparrowflight - brown and ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Apprentice, Maplepaw

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Rosepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Maplepaw - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosepaw - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkpaw - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Poppypaw - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Cobrapaw - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes. Mother to Carrottail's kits:

Rainkit - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomkit - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Liontuft's kits.

Elders

Vulturewing - Big black and dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Twigleaf - Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

ThunderClan

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Apprentice, Vanillapaw

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Breezepaw

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes, yellow eyes.

WindClan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

SkyClan

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Bone Shred's Gang

Leader: Bone Shred - Broad shouldered black tom with three white stripes on each of his sides. Wears a fox skull on his head.

Rogues:

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Crimson Ice - White tom with red paws, chest blaze, muzzle, ears, and stripe down spine, long scar across his eye, amber eyes.

Shredded Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with black paws, dark green eyes.

Dark Hawk - Black tom with green eyes.

Shadow Snarl - Thick furred black tom with amber eyes.

Patch Swipe - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Blinding Sun - Orange and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Glass Face - Silver tom with several cuts on his face, blue eyes.

Oil Tail - Siamese tom with blue eyes.

Heart Burn - Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Howl - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandelion - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Bristle - Spiky furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Glitter - Thin ginger tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Dark Hawk's kits:

Scrappy - Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Sunny - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skipper - Small lighter brown tabby tom with small white patches and light blue-green eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue

collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 15

[image]

A thin layer of snow covered the ground. Iceslide shivered as the cold night air brushed his pelt. He scraped at the hard ground and dug a small hole, dropping a freshly caught mouse in and covering it with dirt and snow. He looked up at the moon. *I still have time... But I'd like to catch a bit more before I go.*

A day had passed since he'd saved Poisoned Sap from the dog in twolegplace. She had introduced him to her brother, a cat unlike any other he'd met, Bone Shred. The powerful looking cat was leader of a large group of cats who lived in an abandoned twoleg nest on the outskirts of twolegplace. But these cats were ill and starving. The sight of it had saddened Iceslide, and he had offered to catch prey for the group.

I have to hunt more than I used to in the clan. Iceslide thought. *Between them and these twolegplace cats, I've really got my paws full.* He began to wonder if he'd been wise to take on the task of hunting for them. *I'm only one cat, and about thirty of them. I can't possibly catch enough prey for them all! But I suppose I can do my best. At least they won't all starve.*

He sniffed at the air, but the snow made it difficult to pick up a strong scent. *Most prey won't like being out in the snow anyway.* Catching fish had been an option, but the river would be cold as ice in this weather. And he would be sure to catch a cold if he trekked all the way to twolegplace with soaked paws. *I'll just have to make do with voles and mice.*

He spotted movement by the roots of a beech tree and flashed his attention to it. A black squirrel was sniffing and leaping among the roots.

Iceslide hesitated. *RiverClan cats don't climb trees... But maybe I can catch it before it decides to.* He crouched and slowly moved forward, careful where he put his paws. The snow was soft and powdery,

unlikely to crunch and give him away. As he neared the squirrel, it gave a nervous scuttle toward the other side of the root, seeming to sense him, but it didn't flee.

After a moment of hesitation, he pounced, and half a moment later, the squirrel started up the tree. But Iceslide quickly stretched up his claws and fastened them into its bushy tail. The squirrel let out a startled squeak as it was dragged down from the tree, and he sank his teeth into its neck. The rodent squealed before going limp.

Maybe a second round of training with Frozenripple did me some good after all. Iceslide thought reluctantly. *I was a lousy hunter before.*

He picked up the squirrel and carried it back to where he'd been burying the fresh kill. He decided that he'd caught enough for the night. Four mice and a squirrel. *If I risk staying out any longer, I'll never make it to twolegplace and back before my clanmates awake.*

Iceslide dug up the rest of the prey, carefully picking them up by their tails. *Ugh, I didn't think about how I'd have to carry it...* He made sure he was gripping all the tails firmly in his teeth before starting toward twolegplace. *At least some cats won't go hungry tonight.*

***

By the time Iceslide reached the abandoned twoleg nest, he was freezing and exhausted, and his teeth were sore from carrying the prey all this way. The squirrel was especially heavy, and the bushy fur in his mouth was making him feel sick.

He padded up the cracked steps of the nest and hesitated. If he went right in, he might be attacked. It was the middle of the night, and they might think him a stranger. He lifted a paw and scratched at the wood of the doorframe.

After a few moments, A black tom stuck his head out, his amber eyes narrowed. "What do you want? Go away!"

Iceslide was about to drop the prey and explain himself when another cat hurried to the tom's side. "No, Shadow Snarl!" The she-cat snapped at him. "This is Iceslide, remember?" She turned to him

and purred a greeting. "Come on in."

The two cats turned away, and he followed them into the old nest. It was very dark, and most cats were asleep on old couches, shelves, and under tables. A few raised their heads at the newcomer.

"Iceslide," Bone Shred's voice rumbled, and he saw the black tom sitting in the shadows near the wall, looking at him through the dark sockets of the skull he wore. "That's not all for us, is it?"

He dipped his head and dropped the prey on the wooden floor, shaking frost from his fur. "Yes, of course." He meowed as the tom stepped forward and sniffed the squirrel. "I'm sorry I couldn't catch more."

"Mama, look, look!"

Iceslide turned to see the three kits racing over to him, their eyes filled with delight. Their mother raised her head drowsily from where she slept under a table.

"He kept his promise!" The dark tabby kit exclaimed, his little tail high in the air as he sniffed the mouse eagerly. "Look at that mouse!"

"Wow!" The she-cat squeaked and took the mouse by its tail.

"Scrappy, Sunny, Skipper!" Their mother called softly. "Don't be rude. It might not be for you."

The three kits paused and looked up at Iceslide and Bone Shred. Sunny didn't let go of the mouse's tail, her yellow eyes filled with hope and hunger.

"It's all yours," Iceslide purred and nudged it toward the kits with his paw. The three kits immediately took the mouse and ran back to their mother with it. "Make sure you share!" He called after them in amusement.

Some other cats were moving closer, studying the prey hesitantly. Iceslide noticed the sick scrawny elder he'd seen the day before. He looked even worse, wheezing and shivering. Feeling a rush of

sympathy, Iceslide picked up the squirrel and padded over to him.

The old tom drifted his gaze to him and sniffled, not raising his head from his paws. "Hmm?"

"Have this." Iceslide dropped the squirrel and nudged it toward him. "It'll make you feel better."

The elderly tabby gave the squirrel a brief sniff, then shook his head. "Prey won't do me no good now," He rasped. "Give it to a younger cat."

He was startled. "But you're sick and starv-"

"No." Bone Shred appeared at his side and reached out, pulling the squirrel away from the elder. The tabby watched it for a moment, then closed his eyes. "He's right, he's not going to make it through the winter."

Iceslide hesitated, looking at the elder sympathetically. "But there's still time..."

"Prey is to be used on the cats who are young and strong," Bone Shred meowed firmly. "There is no point in feeding a cat who's just going to die anyway. Let him be, he won't last much longer." He stepped forward and rested his paw on the elder's scrawny flank. "Rest now. Your suffering will end soon."

The elder let out a raspy sigh. Iceslide stared at him sadly. *I suppose it makes sense... But it's still very sad.* He reluctantly turned away from the dying cat.

Bone Shred had brought the squirrel over to two toms. One was a Siamese cat, the other a silver cat with cuts on his face. "Oil Tail, Glass Face, here." He gave them the squirrel, and the two began eating.

Iceslide spotted two cats sitting in a corner and picked up a mouse, padding over to them. A dark gray tom was sitting close to a yellow tabby and white she-cat. Both were terribly thin, but young. The tom eyed him warily as he approached.

He dropped the mouse and purred a greeting. "Hello. Would you like to share this?"

"Yes." The tom replied almost immediately, and Iceslide realized how hungry he must be. He looked embarrassed and licked his chest. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

"Yes, thank you." The she-cat added gratefully. "You're very kind."

Iceslide felt pride warm him and sat down. "It's the least I could do. My name is Iceslide."

"I'm Howl," The tom meowed as the she-cat crouched and took a bite out of the mouse. "This is my mate, Dandelion." He crouched beside her and joined her in eating.

"Iceslide," Bone Shred called, and he dipped his head to the couple before turning to the leader. "I gave the last mouse to Crimson Ice and Poisoned Sap." He dipped his head. "We're very grateful for this."

He dipped his head. "I couldn't turn away a cat in need." He stretched his jaws in a yawn. *I'm so tired... I'd better get back to camp.* "I should be going."

Bone Shred flicked an ear. "You must be very tired from the journey here. Rest for a while first, I insist."

Iceslide hesitated. *I guess I could, just for a little while...* He settled onto his stomach, becoming aware of how sore his legs were.

The dark tom crouched beside him, and it was silent for a while. Eventually, Bone Shred turned to him. "There must be a lot of prey where you come from," He commented. "You have enough to share."

"Well, yes," Iceslide meowed, glad to have the awkward silence broken. "The forest is full of prey."

"You're very fortunate." Bone Shred looked at his paws. "We struggle to find food every day. It's hard living here."

Sympathy filled his heart. "You deserve a better home."

"Yes." Bone Shred paused and looked to him thoughtfully. "Perhaps you can take us to this forest of yours?" He suggested. "It would save you the trouble of hunting for us. We'd hate to be a burden."

Iceslide hesitated. As much as he wanted to help these cats, it was a ridiculous idea. There were about thirty of them, and there was no way they could all join RiverClan. He doubted Shimmerstar would be pleased if he brought her a group of scrawny twolegplace cats. There was no way they could join in any of the clans without Iceslide's secret being revealed.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that," Iceslide meowed reluctantly. "I shouldn't even be here. My clan would be furious. And there just isn't enough room for you all."

Bone Shred was quiet for a moment. "I understand." He said at last. "I suppose we can manage fine here."

"Rocky! No!"

A wail startled Iceslide, and he swung his head around. Dandelion was crouched over a scrawny brown tom who lay motionless in a corner. "He's dead!" She cried, and Howl pressed against her, resting his tail around her.

"He starved to death," Bone Shred meowed quietly. "He was old and sick anyway, like that other cat you tried to give the squirrel to." He sat up and raised his voice. "Crimson Ice, Dark Hawk, go take the body outside."

Iceslide stared sadly as the two cats carried the dead cat between them and headed outside. Dandelion started after him, but Howl blocked her, shaking his head. She hung her head and sobbed.

I have to do something... He thought sadly. *This is terrible.* He looked at Bone Shred. "I think there's a patch of forest just outside RiverClan territory," He meowed hesitantly. "It's not very big, but I think you could settle there. There would be much more prey."

"Hmm..." Bone Shred's tail twitched slowly as he thought. "I think that would be perfect." He stood up and raised his voice. "Iceslide

has offered to take us to a new home by the forest!"

The cats around them murmured to one another excitedly.

"Really? With lots of food?" A kit squeaked.

"Is it far?"

"Will we be safe?"

Bone Shred looked at Iceslide, and he quickly spoke up. "Of course!" Iceslide meowed, raising his voice for all to hear. "There's a patch of woodland, and the land will be yours. You'll be safe, sheltered, and you'll have plenty of food."

The cats meowed together excitedly.

"That sounds great!" Howl exclaimed.

"When do we leave?" The queen under the table asked anxiously.

"I suggest we leave at dawn." Bone Shred looked beside him at Iceslide. "What do you say, friend?"

He hesitated. *I should be getting back to camp... But they need someone to lead them there.* He hoped that if anyone asked, Sunripple would cover for him. He was clever and could come up with an explanation to Iceslide's whereabouts.

"Yes," Iceslide agreed, looking around at the eager cats. "We'll leave at dawn." Pride filled his chest. *I'm going to help these cats! They won't have to live like this any longer. They'll be much better off by the forest.*

Chapter 16

[image]

Iceslide awoke to a paw prodding his shoulder. He blinked up and saw Bone Shred standing over him, looking down at him through the empty eye sockets of the skull. "It's dawn," He meowed. "Shall we leave now?"

With a start, he remembered the events of last night. *I told Bone Shred's cats that I'd take them to a patch of woodland outside RiverClan territory.* He yawned and arched his back as he stretched. "Yes, of course."

Many cats were already standing near the door, waiting for them. The three kits were bouncing around their mother's legs excitedly.

"I can't wait!" Skipper squeaked excitedly. "What do you think it'll be like?"

"It'll be awesome!" Scrappy exclaimed.

Iceslide purred and got to his paws, and he and Bone Shred padded over to the others. *The kits will be much happier there.*

"Is everyone here?" Bone Shred scanned the group with his empty gaze.

Iceslide glanced behind him. The room looked empty. He suddenly noticed that the elderly tom was still laying against the wall, his bony flank heaving as he breathed. He looked back at Bone Shred. "What about him?"

The rogue leader paused, glancing back at him. "He's going to die, remember? He'd never make the journey anyway."

I guess... Iceslide watched the old cat sadly. *He shouldn't be left here to die alone... But What can I do about it?* With a sigh, he turned away. "Alright... Let's go."

***

The sun was rising as they traveled through twolegplace along the sidewalk. Iceslide was leading the group with Bone Shred alongside him. So far, the journey was going well, and every cat was keeping up well, even the kits.

"How far is it?" Bone Shred asked.

"Not too far," Iceslide meowed. "But it'll take some time to get there. We'll have to go around the clan territories." The cats paused as they prepared to cross a road.

Poisoned Sap padded to Iceslide's side. "I can't wait to taste some juicy forest prey." She licked her lips, and her amber eyes gleamed. "You're very generous to help us, Iceslide."

"I'm happy to help," Iceslide replied warmly. "I think you'll like it there."

"I'm sure we will." Poisoned Sap waved her tail.

They were almost at the outskirts of twolegplace when three cats appeared from around the corner of a fence. Bone Shred hissed and arched his back, and several others did the same.

Juicy, Violet, and Parrot looked alarmed, and Iceslide looked at Bone Shred anxiously. "No, it's okay! I know them."

"Iceslide?" Violet stared at him, then looked past him at the bristling strangers. "W-who are they?"

Parrot gulped and lowered himself to the ground, his eyes wide and afraid. "That's a skull!" Beside him, Juicy looked frozen.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Iceslide promised his friends and looked at Bone Shred. The black tom's fur was slowly flattening. "This is Bone Shred. I'm taking he and his cats to a new place to live."

"Greetings," Bone Shred rumbled. "We're just passing through."

The kittypets didn't respond, looking nervous. At last, Parrot broke the silence. "Why are you hanging out with such a shady group?"

Some of the cats took offense to that and hissed, while others lashed their tails. Bone Shred looked over his shoulder and growled a warning, and they quieted.

"These cats are fine," Iceslide insisted. "Bone Shred wears the skull to frighten off enemies. He won't harm you, and neither will any of the others."

"Iceslide, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we should get moving," Bone Shred meowed quietly.

"Of course." Iceslide nodded agreement. He needed to get back to RiverClan as soon as possible. "I'm sorry, we need to go now." He blinked warmly at the kittypets. "See you." His gaze rested on Violet, and she returned it, though she looked uneasy.

Juicy and Parrot hurried away, but Violet hesitantly stepped forward. "May I travel with you for a bit?"

Bone Shred flicked his ear and said nothing. Iceslide stepped forward. "Of course," He meowed happily. *I want to spend time with Violet every chance I get.* "Let's go."

As the cats continued down the sidewalk, Iceslide padded ahead of the group, and Violet fell in beside him. "What are you doing?" She whispered.

Iceslide blinked at her. "I'm helping these cats. They're starving."

"But..." Violet's blue eyes were clouded with unease. "I think you're making a mistake, Iceslide... Those cats are trouble. Just look at the one with the skull..."

He turned his head and gently licked her ear. "There's nothing to be afraid of," He promised. "They're just cats like you and I."

Violet looked down. "I suppose so... Just... Be careful." She touched her nose to his. "I'll get going now. Take care, Iceslide." She looked at him for a moment longer, then turned and ran toward her twoleg

nest.

***

It was sunhigh when they reached the area just outside of RiverClan territory. Iceslide led them through the snowy grass and looked over his shoulder. A few cats were getting tired, particularly the kits.

"Glitter, are we there yet?" Skipper asked his mother.

"Yeah, my paws are sore!" Sunny complained, her little orange tail dragging behind her.

Glitter looked down at them sympathetically. "It won't be much longer, I hope."

Bone Shred looked at Iceslide, who quickly assured him. "Not far now." He looked ahead at the trees in the distance. "Just over there."

It wasn't long before they reached the patch of woodland. Iceslide sat down by the edge of a small clearing, watching as the cats padded in and looked around. Bone Shred was at the head of the group, studying their surroundings.

"Wow, look at the trees!" Skipper exclaimed, and he and his siblings raced over to one of them. "Come on!"

"This is a great place," Howl meowed as he looked around. "There's bound to be lots of prey around here."

Crimson Ice let out a purr. "Mice, squirrels, birds." He turned to Bone Shred. "This is perfect."

"Yes," Bone Shred agreed, looking around a moment longer before turning to Iceslide. "We'll make ourselves a fine home here. We can't thank you enough, Iceslide."

Iceslide dipped his head. I've done a great thing here. *These cats will thrive and never have to go hungry again.*

"Hey, Iceslide?" Oil Tail padded up to him, his blue eyes gleaming. "We don't know much about hunting here. Would you show us some techniques, teach us how to tackle hunting among trees?"

"I'd be happy to," He replied, though his paws itched to get back to camp. Some cat will realize I'm gone. I need to hurry.

Bone Shred nodded. "Good idea. Poisoned Sap and Shredded Ivy can join you two."

Overhearing this, Poisoned Sap padded over, followed by a dark tabby she-cat that Iceslide didn't recognize. Her dark green eyes rested on him. "Hello," She purred.

"I don't believe you've met my daughter," Bone Shred meowed, nodding to her. "This is Shredded Ivy."

Iceslide dipped his head. "It's nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine," Shredded Ivy purred, her eyes gleaming at him.

"Right." Oil Tail twitched his skinny black tail. "Let's go."

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Iceslide took the three cats further into the woods and sniffed around. *This will be a great place for them.* He confirmed. "There'll be much more prey here in new-leaf." He turned to the others. "But there's bound to be a squirrel or a mouse around here."

"Yes." Oil Tail studied their surroundings. He suddenly raced forward, and Iceslide watched as the cream and black tom caught a mouse and returned with it.

"Good catch!" Iceslide purred. "See, you'll get on fine here."

Poisoned Sap narrowed her eyes. "Do twolegs come around here?"

"Not that I know of," Iceslide meowed. "I'm sure it's safe. You might need to watch out for foxes and badgers though."

"Nothing we can't handle." Shredded Ivy walked by and swept her tail under his chin. "Every cat will thrive here, and it's all thanks to you, Iceslide." Her dark eyes glittered as she leaned closer to him. "We owe you a lot."

Iceslide shifted away uncomfortably. "Err it's nothing," He meowed. *Sorry, but I've only got eyes for Violet. You don't even know me.*

He went on showing them how to catch squirrels and mice, and keep downwind of the prey. It had taken a while for them to understand that when stalking, they needed to watch for leaves and twigs that might alert their prey. In twolegplace, this wasn't an issue.

But eventually, they seemed to understand, and did very well for their first hunting session in the forest. They returned with three mice, a bird, and a squirrel. Bone Shred watched as they deposited the prey in the middle of the clearing, starting a fresh kill pile.

"There really is a lot of prey here," Bone Shred sounded pleased. "Perfect."

Iceslide didn't want to be rude, but knew that he needed to get back to camp. "I'm sorry, but I need to get going," He meowed. "My clan will be upset."

"Of course," The leader dipped his head. "Thank you for all your help, Iceslide." He turned and looked at his cats as they settled in the clearing, beginning to build nests of moss. "You've done us a great favor."

***

The sun was high when Iceslide returned to camp. This time, he'd been smart and caught a couple mice first. If he came home empty pawed, cats would question him for sure. He hoped that no cat had noticed his absence. But he'd been gone all night and half the day. He nervously padded into the camp.

Divetail and Cherryberry were sharing a trout by the side of the clearing. Frozenripple was speaking to Dipfoot, and Sunripple

crouched by the fresh kill pile.

Here it goes... He went to the fresh kill pile and dropped his mice on it. Sunripple glanced up, his eyes flashing. "Where have you been?" He whispered.

Iceslide hesitated. "Twolegplace," He murmured, crouching beside him. "Did anyone notice I was gone?"

"Frostedcloud wanted you for the dawn patrol," Sunripple meowed quietly. "I told him the two of us had gone fishing during the night because we couldn't sleep, and you were tired. I think he bought it, and no cat checked if you were in the den or not."

Thank StarClan! He relaxed. "Thanks." He looked around the camp. "Did I miss anything?"

Sunripple hesitated. "Not really. Petalfin's kits were apprenticed. That's about it." He looked at him seriously. "You shouldn't stay away so long. It's risky."

"I know, it won't happen again." Iceslide stood up.

"Iceslide!" Winterlight ran over to them, purring a greeting. "Do you want to go fishing with me?"

Now? He was exhausted, but couldn't say no. His sister had been devastated when Ravenfeather ended their relationship, and she was finally back to her regular cheerful self. He had to spend time with her. "Of course," He meowed warmly. "Let's go."

As they headed out of camp, Iceslide couldn't help but feel good about himself. *I helped a lot of cats today. Maybe the warrior code wouldn't agree with it, but it doesn't matter if I've saved so many cats from starvation.*

Chapter 17

[image]

A full moon shone down on the snow blanketing the ground, the frosty surface glittering in the moonlight. Iceslide followed his clanmates through the snow, leaving pawprints behind them as they headed toward fourtrees. It had been a long time since he'd been to a gathering, and he was looking forward to it.

Three days had passed since he'd taken Bone Shred and his cats to the woodland outside RiverClan territory. He'd sneaked out yesterday to see how they were settling in, and he'd been glad to see that they'd certainly made a home for themselves. The cats had been making nests under bushes and inside logs, and some had even started building dens out of sticks and small branches. He'd been glad to see it.

When they reached the clearing at fourtrees, many cats were already gathered, and Iceslide recognized the scents of ThunderClan and ShadowClan. Stormstar and Birchstar sat on the great rock, speaking to each other, while their medicine cats and deputies sat below them among the roots of the great oaks.

Iceslide spotted his friend, Baconstripe, among the ShadowClan warriors, but he was deep in conversation with Redblaze and a young warrior named Ashcloud. *I'd better not bother him.* He decided, mildly disappointed.

He looked around and saw Broadwing and Birdsong, and weaved through the crowd of ThunderClan cats toward them. "Hey," He greeted them.

Birdsong's eyes brightened. "Iceslide, long time no see! Where have you been?"

"Err, I just haven't been chosen to go to the past few gatherings," Iceslide meowed, thinking quickly. *There's no way I'm telling them that Shimmerstar revoked my warrior name for a while!* "It's good to

see you! How's the prey running in ThunderClan?"

Broadwing nodded. "It's running well. We'd better make the most of it before leaf-bare arrives." He looked down and shook snow from his paw. "It won't be long now."

"WindClan has arrived," A white tom padded over, and Iceslide was taken back by him.

"Snowpaw, is that you?" Iceslide exclaimed. The last time he'd seen the apprentice, he'd been big for his age. But now, he was nearly as tall as his mentor, and had the same broad shoulders. "Great StarClan, you've grown!"

The apprentice dipped his head, flicking a tufted ear in embarrassment. "Thank you, I've been training hard," He meowed proudly.

Broadwing looked at Snowpaw proudly. "That's right. He'll be completing his assessment soon."

"I'm sure you'll be a great warrior," Iceslide meowed, and Snowpaw dipped his head in thanks.

"Let the gathering begin!"

Iceslide turned to the great rock and saw that all the leaders were present. *SkyClan must have arrived while we were talking.* He dipped his head to the ThunderClan cats, then went to join with his own clan. He settled beside Sunripple and turned his attention to the leaders, and the other cats in the clearing quickly quieted.

Birchstar was the first to speak. He stepped forward, his white patches like snow on his tabby fur, and raised his voice for all to hear. "Cats of all clans, welcome to the gathering. I will begin." He paused, looking down on the cats gathered below. "ThunderClan has been well. Our medicine cat, Flowerwing, has begun training an apprentice, Spicepaw."

Below the great rock, Iceslide saw the new apprentice sitting with the other medicine cats. He was a small black tom with a white muzzle. He looked uneasy under the gazes of the other cats, but

also excited. Flowerwing sat beside him, looking proud of him.

"That is all that ThunderClan has to share." Birchstar dipped his head and stepped back, sitting down as Stormstar rose.

"I'm pleased to say that ShadowClan is thriving," The dark gray tabby meowed, his green eyes shining with pride. "My mate, Silverblossom, has given birth to two healthy kits, Dewkit and Diamondkit." He paused as some cats murmured congratulations to the ShadowClan leader, then continued. "We also have several new warriors. Firstly, we have Maplefur, Rosebreeze, and Milkblaze!"

"Maplefur! Rosebreeze! Milkblaze!"

The cats cheered, and Iceslide peered over the heads of the other cats. He saw the cream tabby cats sitting together proudly. Not far from them, their parents, Baconstripe and Redblaze, cheered the loudest, eyes shining with pride.

As the cheering died down, Stormstar continued. "And just yesterday, two more apprentices earned their warrior names. Rainheart and Bloomfire!"

"Rainheart! Bloomfire!"

Iceslide saw the siblings sitting among the ShadowClan warriors, looking ready to burst with pride. A red tabby she-cat was sitting near Rainheart, gazing at him warmly. Bloomfire's tail was wrapped around her paws, her green eyes shining as the cats called her new name.

When the cats quieted, Stormstar stepped back. "That's all ShadowClan has to share."

"That's all, is it?" Strawberryspots snorted loudly from among the deputies. A moment later, a ball of snow flew into the back of her head, and she spun, eyes flaring as she shook snow from her back. "Who did that?"

The warriors behind her gave nothing away. Iceslide had to hold back chuckling in amusement. *Whoever did that is amazing!*

"The prey is running well in SkyClan," Whitestar announced. "One of our queens has given birth to a litter of kits."

When she finished, Shimmerstar took her place at the front of the rock. "RiverClan has been well, and we have plenty of kits in the nursery," She meowed. "The river has frozen over, however it will not weaken RiverClan." She paused. "We have three new apprentices. Willowpaw, Darkpaw, and Mintpaw!"

The cats cheered, and Iceslide saw Frozenripple watching his kits proudly. When Shimmerstar finished, Gladestar padded forward.

"The prey is running fast on the moor, but never too fast for WindClan," Gladestar began. "One of our queens, Dreamwhisper, has given birth to three kits, Starkit, Blazingkit, and Petalkit."

Dreamwhisper? Iceslide remembered that she was the cat that Sunripple was meeting in secret. He looked aside at his friend and saw his yellow eyes shining with pride. He immediately understood. "They're your kits, aren't they?" He whispered.

Sunripple nodded, looking ready to burst with happiness. "I wish I could see them," He murmured longingly, and Iceslide felt a pang of sympathy for him. *It must be hard being apart from Dreamwhisper.* He began thinking of Violet. *I can't wait to see her again...*

"Last night, we needed to chase a few rogues off of WindClan territory," Gladestar went on. "We aren't sure where they came from, but they headed in the direction of RiverClan territory." She looked at Shimmerstar. "I don't know where they went from there, but I advise you to watch your borders."

"Thank you, Gladestar," Shimmerstar dipped her head politely. "I don't think a few rogues will be a problem, but we'll keep an eye out."

Iceslide grew uneasy. Bone Shred and his cats lived just outside of RiverClan territory. Could they have trespassed on WindClan territory? *No.* He shook his head. *They have enough prey on their new land. They were probably just exploring and didn't realize they crossed a border.* Cats outside the clans knew very little about the clan's ways

and scent markers. *Tomorrow I'll ask them about it and remind them that they can't hunt on clan territory.*

"That brings the gathering to an end!" Shimmerstar meowed, breaking Iceslide out of his thoughts. "May StarClan light our paths until we meet again next moon." With a quick word to the other leaders, she leaped down from the rock, and the cats below began dispersing.

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The next day, Iceslide sneaked out of camp to visit Bone Shred's camp. He knew that he shouldn't risk it, but he needed to make sure that they understood how the clan borders worked.

I need to be careful about when I leave. He thought as he padded through the frosted grass toward the woodland. *If I do it too often, cats will notice. Sunripple can only cover for me so much. And I don't want him getting into trouble.*

As he reached the woodland, he sniffed at the air. The scent of cats was very strong, nearly as strong as a clan's scent would be. *They've marked their territory already.* He continued through the trees, looking around.

"Who's there?" Shadow Snarl leaped out of the bushes, his teeth bared. As Iceslide started backwards, he recognized him and let his fur flatten. "Ah, Iceslide."

"Hello," Iceslide dipped his head. "How's it going?"

"Fine." The black tom looked confused and irritated. "What do you want?"

He was surprised at his hostile behavior. *Have they forgotten what I've done for them?* "I just wanted to speak to Bone Shred."

"Shadow Snarl!" Poisoned Sap stepped out of the bushes, glaring at the tom. "What's wrong with you? This is Iceslide, remember? He's always welcome here, you dumb furball." She cuffed him over the ear, and Shadow Snarl growled softly.

"I probably just startled him," Iceslide pointed out. *I pity any cat who has to take insults from Poisoned Sap.* "How are you, Poisoned Sap?"

She turned to him, her amber eyes shining. "Since you brought us here, we've all been wonderful." She swished her ragged tail as she turned away. "Come on, you're always welcome in our camp," She purred.

Iceslide followed her through the woodland, aware of Shadow Snarl padding behind him. When they reached the camp, he was surprised to see how much they'd accomplished since he'd last been here just a few days ago.

The camp was much less organized than a clan's would be. In a clan, there would be a den for the warriors, a den for the apprentices, the elders, and so on. However at Bone Shred's camp, there were small dens meant for only one or two cats, sometimes three. It seemed that typically relatives or mates shared a den, while most preferred to have their own private den all to themselves.

As they padded through the clearing, Iceslide looked around. He saw Howl and Dandelion eating a mouse by their own den of leaves and branches. They paused and looked up at him warmly in a greeting before continuing. Not far from them, Crimson Ice was speaking with Dark Hawk and Patch Swipe.

He looked ahead and saw Bone Shred. The black tom was laying on a large log, likely in which he slept. He seemed to sense them approaching and turned his skull-masked face toward them. When he saw Iceslide, he sat up. "Greetings."

"Greetings," Iceslide replied politely, dipping his head as the large cat jumped down from the log and sat down. "I wanted to visit and make sure you're all alright," He said as he sat down in front of the rogue leader. He was aware of Poisoned Sap and Shadow Snarl sitting on either side of him.

"We're excellent," Bone Shred rumbled, swishing his thick black tail over the snowy ground. "You've given us the home we've always hoped for." He paused as though not knowing what to say. "You

were just here a few days ago, yes?"

Iceslide nodded. He'd wanted to talk for a while before he went accusing them of trespassing, but it looked like he had no choice but to dive right into it. "The leader of WindClan says that there were some rogues on their territory the other night," He meowed.

Bone Shred tilted his head. "The moorland cats?"

"That's right."

"Ah, yes, Blinding Sun and Glass Face ran into some while they were hunting on the moor." Bone Shred said no more, staring at Iceslide through the dark sockets of his skull.

When Iceslide realized he wasn't going to say any more, he hesitantly spoke. "Yes, well, you can't trespass on clan territory," He meowed as politely as he could. "You see, each clan has their own territory to hunt on."

"So... You never hunt on the moor?" Bone Shred sounded surprised.

"No," Iceslide meowed. "We stick to our own territories. That way the food is equally divided, and no cat goes hungry." He gestured behind them with his tail. "You have plenty of prey here in the woods, don't you?"

He paused. "Yes, we have plenty."

"So you don't need to take WindClan prey, or any other clan's," Iceslide told him. "We can all live happily respecting one another."

"But how can you know when another cat is on your land?" Poisoned Sap asked in bewilderment. "You can't be everywhere at once."

Rogues don't know a thing about clan life. Iceslide thought. I guess I'll have to explain a lot. "We have patrols out throughout the day," He explained. "They mark the territory and watch for intruders."

Shadow Snarl snorted. "All the time? Don't you sleep?"

"Oh, no," Iceslide couldn't hide his amusement. "We don't patrol during the night. The first patrol goes out at dawn."

"So every cat sleeps at night?" Poisoned Sap tilted her head. "No one watches for danger?"

"We always have a couple guards by the camp entrances," Iceslide meowed. He paused, then turned to Bone Shred. "So you see, everyone needs to respect each other's boundaries. There's enough prey to go around."

Bone Shred was quiet for a moment, and Iceslide began to wonder if he'd offended the rogue leader. Then, he let out a purr. "Of course, Iceslide. My apologies, we don't know about the ways of the clans. But we will keep this in mind."

Iceslide was relieved at this. I'm glad they understand! Now that's over with, and there won't be any more problems. "That's great! I'd better get back to camp now." He dipped his head. "Good hunting."

"Thank you, and the same to you, my friend." Bone Shred nodded, and Iceslide felt the tom's gaze on him as he turned away.

Thank StarClan. Iceslide thought as he left the camp. *I'm glad there aren't any hard feelings between us.*

Chapter 18

[image]

Light flurries of snow drifted onto the sandy clearing. The air was chilly, but there was little to no wind, so it wasn't terribly cold.

For once, Iceslide was comfortable being in the RiverClan camp. He knew that on a snowy day like this, Violet would be inside, as would most of the other kittypets. There was no point going to twolegplace. He was sitting by the frozen reeds with Winterlight, sharing a trout with her.

"Shorestep, I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol," Frostedcloud was meowing from the center of the clearing. "Take Salmonstripe, Petalfin, and Perchstripe with you."

The sandy she-cat nodded, and Iceslide watched as she and the others left the camp. "You must miss fishing since the river's frozen over," He commented to his sister.

Winterlight sighed. "I do," She admitted. "I can't wait for new-leaf."

"Leaf-bare has barely even started!" Iceslide purred in amusement.

"Well it's been long enough for me!" She exclaimed, her eyes gleaming.

For the first time since any cat could remember, the elders den was empty. Last night, Shadepath had died of old age. The apprentices no longer had the duty of caring for the elder, but every cat could tell that they were saddened by the loss of the old she-cat. Even Darkpaw, who had always complained about having to remove her ticks, had grown quiet and seemed to grieve for her.

"Can we go do some battle training?" Willowpaw asked her mentor excitedly, her silver tail high in the air. "Please!"

Cherryberry hesitated, looking out past the reeds that lined the camp. "Why don't we wait for the snow to stop?"

"But it'll be funner in the snow!" Willowpaw insisted.

"Are you going for a training session?" Divetail crossed the clearing toward them, blinking warmly. "Can me and Darkpaw join you?"

"Oh, Divetail." Cherryberry looked embarrassed and let out a purr. "Yes, we were. Of course you can."

Beside her, Willowpaw rolled her eyes. "*Now* she says yes," She muttered. Across from her, Darkpaw snickered, also aware of the romance between their mentors.

As the four cats left the camp, Cherryberry keeping close to Divetail's side, Iceslide turned his attention to the nursery, where several cats were gathered.

Shallowpool had begun kitting not long ago. Maplesky and Otterpelt were in the nursery with her now. Shallowpool's mate, Dipfoot, was sitting outside the nursery, his tail flicking back and forth nervously.

Not far from them, Heartsong was sitting with her tail curled over her paws, her belly round. She had moved into the nursery, expecting Creekleap's kits.

"Heartsong!" The golden tabby tom raced over to her. "What are you doing outside?" He exclaimed in horror. "It's cold!"

The silver and white she-cat purred in amusement. "Creekleap, I'm fine," She purred. "Maplesky and Otterpelt needed room. A little snow isn't going to hurt me."

Creekleap reached out and rested his paw on her shoulder. "See, you're freezing!" He gently nudged her to her paws. "Great StarClan, our kits will be icicles when they arrive!"

"Creek-"

"Come on, we're going to the warriors den to my nest where you'll

be warm," Creekleap insisted as he guided her toward the den. Heartsong let out an amused purr as they went inside.

A few moments later, Maplesky emerged from the nursery. Dipfoot raised his head sharply, and the medicine cat purred. "Congratulations, Dipfoot. You'd better go meet your kits." As he and Otterpelt left, Dipfoot slipped into the den.

"We have so many young cats these days," Lakesong purred from where she sat by the warriors den. Ravenfeather was with her. "Kits are great news for the clan."

"Yes," The black warrior agreed, narrowing his eyes at Winterlight. "To most cats, that is."

Iceslide's tail lashed in frustration. He cast a glance at his sister. He knew she'd heard him, but she was ignoring him. Ravenfeather glared at her for a moment longer, then snorted and continued talking to Lakesong.

He wanted a reaction, but he didn't get one. Iceslide thought, proud of his sister. He gave her a lick on the ear.

Winterlight blinked at him warmly. "It shouldn't be long before Coralshine moves into the nursery," She commented. "She and Blizzardfur have been together for a long time."

He saw his brother with Coralshine now. The two were laying together by the side of the camp. Blizzardfur's chin was rested on her shoulder, his eyes closed and content.

"I'm happy for him," Iceslide murmured, and Winterlight nodded agreement.

A few moments later, Dipfoot emerged from the den, his eyes full of happiness. "Two toms and a she-cat!" He purred. "We've named them Thunderkit, Eelkit, and Ruskakit."

"Congratulations!" Lakesong purred, and several others joined in.

Dipfoot's tail was high in the air. "I-"

"Shimmerstar!"

Everyone's attention snapped to the camp entrance at the yowl. Iceslide stood and stared in alarm as Shorestep limped into camp, followed by the rest of her patrol. The sandy she-cat's shoulder trickled with blood. Behind her, Salmonstripe had a cut just above his eye, and Perchstripe and Petalfin had scratches.

Shimmerstar emerged from her den, her eyes widening. She immediately shot over to her warriors. "What's happened?" She demanded as Frostedcloud raced to the medicine den to get Maplesky.

"We were attacked!" Shorestep spat, wincing as she sat down and licked blood from her shoulder. "Rogues!"

Maplesky and Otterpelt hurried over with bundles of cobweb. "Hold still," Maplesky began dabbing Shorestep's wound while Otterpelt went to Perchstripe.

"About five of them just came out of nowhere!" Salmonstripe shook blood from his eyelid, and Shimmerstar sniffed at her mate anxiously. "They attacked us and stole all the prey we'd caught."

"There are no serious injuries, thank StarClan," Maplesky sighed, looking at Shimmerstar. "We got lucky."

Cats surrounded the patrol, murmuring to one another anxiously. Iceslide stared at the wounded cats. *Who could have done this?* He refused to believe it was Bone Shred's cats. Trespassing and attacking were two different things, and the group never struck him as aggressive.

"So Gladestar was right to warn us." Shimmerstar looked thoughtful. "We just need to stand our ground and show them that they're outnumbered and not welcome here." She turned to Frostedcloud. "Increase the patrols until we're sure they've gone."

The deputy nodded, but his attention quickly turned away from his leader. "Otterpelt? Are you alright?"

The medicine cat apprentice was hunched over a little ways away,

her eyes wide as she trembled. "It's begun..." She whispered.

Maplesky stared at her. "Otterpelt, listen to-"

"It's begun!" Otterpelt wailed, startling every cat around her. "Oh, StarClan, save us!" She cried and raced to the medicine den, leaving the alarmed clan staring after her.

Allegiances Update #5

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Grayshadow - Gray tom with a black underbelly, yellow eyes.

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Apprentice, Mintpaw

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Divetail - Silver tom with a darker tail, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Risingpaw

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dovepaw

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Arcticpaw

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Fintail - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Newttail - Thin black and brown tabby tom with a red striped tail, amber eyes.

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Apprentices

Willowpaw - Silver and white she-cat with blue eyes.

Darkpaw - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintpaw - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Arcticpaw - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovepaw- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingpaw - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Queens

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes. Mother to Dipfoot's kits:

Thunderkit - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Eelkit - Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes and a sleek tail.

Ruskakit - Tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes.

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes. Expecting Creekleap's kits.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Apprentices

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes. Mother to Stormstar's kits:

Dewkit - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondkit - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Spicepaw

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Snowpaw

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentices:

Snowpaw - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillapaw - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Spicepaw - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Willowpaw- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Queens

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes. Mother to Weaselnose's kits:

Starkit - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingkit - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalkit - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep

green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Bone Shred's Gang

Leader: Bone Shred - Broad shouldered black tom with three white stripes on each of his sides. Wears a fox skull on his head.

Rogues:

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Crimson Ice - White tom with red paws, chest blaze, muzzle, ears, and stripe down spine, long scar across his eye, amber eyes.

Shredded Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with black paws, dark green eyes.

Dark Hawk - Black tom with green eyes.

Shadow Snarl - Thick furred black tom with amber eyes.

Patch Swipe - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Blinding Sun - Orange and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Glass Face - Silver tom with several cuts on his face, blue eyes.

Oil Tail - Siamese tom with blue eyes.

Heart Burn - Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Howl - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandelion - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Bristle - Spiky furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Glitter - Thin ginger tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Dark Hawk's kits:

Scrappy - Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Sunny - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skipper - Small lighter brown tabby tom with small white patches and light blue-green eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 19

[image]

A moon passed, and even more snow covered the ground. It was more difficult for the cats to trudge through the thick snow, as it was halfway up their legs. For cats with shorter legs and apprentices, the snow brushed against their stomach.

"It's freezing!" Arcticpaw shivered as he pushed through the snow. "I hope there's less snow at fourtrees."

His mentor, Ravenfeather, flicked him on the shoulder with his tail. "With any luck, there will be with all the cats walking about it."

When they reached the fourtrees clearing, they found that they were the last clan to arrive. The others were all present, and Iceslide sensed the tension in the clearing immediately. Nearly every cat was speaking quietly to one another anxiously. Even the leaders were deep in discussion, and judging by the looks on their faces, it wasn't casual discussion. It was something serious.

"At last, RiverClan!" Whitestar exclaimed from the great rock, and the other leaders turned as Shimmerstar joined them.

Iceslide spotted Firetail and padded over to him. "What's going-"

"Shh, they're starting!" Firetail stared up at the leaders.

Whitestar raised her voice. "Cats of all clans, I think we all have the same news to share this moon. SkyClan has had its patrols attacked twice now."

As the cats below began murmuring anxiously, Birchstar spoke over them. "ThunderClan too. Our cats were attacked during a training session, and two apprentices were wounded."

Shimmerstar's eyes widened. "One of our patrols was attacked a quarter moon ago," She meowed.

"You too?" Stormstar stared at the RiverClan leader. "ShadowClan has been attacked as well. One of our youngest warriors, Cliffshade, was out hunting alone when he was ambushed. He nearly died."

"WindClan has been seeing more of these rogues too," Gladestar put in, looking uneasy. "It seems they aren't just passing rogues. They're threatening us."

Iceslide's pelt prickled with unease. More of them? Where could they be coming from?

Ravenfeather spoke up from among the RiverClan cats. "We should find their home and give them a fight they won't forget!"

"Don't be mouse-brained!" A WindClan warrior, Bouldercrash, hissed at him. "We don't even know where they live."

"Enough!" Stormstar snapped, and the cats fell silent. "This is a serious matter, but until we learn more about these rogues, I don't see how we can get rid of them. For now, I suggest each clan increase their patrols."

"And don't send apprentices out alone," Birchstar added, flicking his tail. "Send two or three others with them."

The other leaders nodded agreement, and then each leader began sharing other news about their clan. But Iceslide wasn't interested, and most others weren't either, murmuring to one another about the rogues.

He saw Baconstripe and padded over to him. "What do you think?" He asked quietly.

The reddish warrior shook his head. "I have no idea. Rogues usually don't give us trouble like this."

"Where did they come from?" Ashcloud put in beside him. "There aren't many rogues around here."

Baconstripe frowned. "I guess cats travel. Perhaps they'll leave when they realize how many of us there are."

"And that brings the gathering to an end." Birchstar's voice rose from the great rock, and Iceslide looked up as the ThunderClan leader prepared to jump down.

Gladestar raised her tail. "Wait." The tom paused, and she went on. "I suggest that if any of us have serious trouble with the rogues or learn useful information, we send a messenger to tell each of the other clans."

The other leaders nodded agreement. "Very well," Whitestar meowed.

The leaders left the great rock and began gathering their clans, and Baconstripe dipped his head to Iceslide. "Take care."

As the ShadowClan warriors padded after Stormstar, Iceslide joined his own clanmates. *I'd better not sneak out much with these rogues about...* He realized. *When will I find the time to see Violet?*

***

Movement awoke Iceslide. He raised his chin from his nest and blinked drowsily. Sunripple was carefully weaving around the sleeping cats in the darkness toward the opening of the den. *Going to see Dreamwhisper.* He was about to go back to sleep when a thought struck him, and he hesitated. *It's dangerous for any cat to be out on their own with these rogues around...*

He rose to his paws and followed Sunripple out of the den, careful about where he put his paws to avoid waking anyone. He nearly stepped on Dipfoot's tail, but pulled his paw back just in time.

When he reached the mouth of the den, Sunripple was in the clearing. He must have heard him and spun, his eyes lighting with alarm. He relaxed when he saw that it was Iceslide, and slipped between the reeds out of the camp. Iceslide followed.

When they were outside the camp, Sunripple turned to him. "What are you doing?" He whispered.

"Let me come with you," Iceslide breathed as they padded through the snow.

Sunripple shot him a startled look. "What? Why?"

"Have you forgotten about the rogues?" Iceslide meowed quietly. "It's dangerous to be out here alone."

The orange and gold warrior hesitated, looking uncomfortable, and Iceslide understood that it would be just a little awkward with him there. He wanted to be alone to speak with Dreamwhisper.

"Two cats alone in the middle of the night are easy targets," Iceslide reminded him. "I'll just keep watch and make sure no one sneaks up on you."

Sunripple hesitated. "Well... Alright." After a moment, he added, "Thanks, Iceslide."

It didn't take long for them to reach the river. They were by the twoleg bridge where Iceslide had first caught Sunripple and Dreamwhisper together. *This must be their regular meeting place.*

As Iceslide looked around in the darkness, Sunripple stepped onto the frozen surface, looking around. "Dreamwhisper?" He whispered.

A moment later, the creamy she-cat slipped out from under the bridge, her eyes lighting up when she saw him. "Sunripple!" The two cats rushed forward to meet each other, purring loudly as they nuzzled each other. They slid on the ice and almost collapsed, but leaned on each other, purring in amusement.

Iceslide watched them with a rush of envy. *If only I could do that with Violet more...*

Dreamwhisper noticed Iceslide and drew back. "What's he doing here?"

"He wanted to come with me in case the rogues were around," Sunripple told her, but he didn't seem worried about them. His attention was entirely on her. "How are you? How did the kitting go? What do they look like? Are-"

She purred. "Slow down!" She licked his head. "The kitting went fine. Starkit is a yellow she-cat, and she's the smallest of the litter.

The other she-cat is Petalkit, she looks a bit like you. And the yellow tom is Blazingkit."

"You chose great names," Sunripple purred. Suddenly, unease filled his gaze. "Have your clanmates asked about the father?"

Dreamwhisper hesitated, and her eyes clouded. "Well..."

Sunripple stared at her. "What is it?"

"They think the father is Weaselnose," She admitted, looking at her paws. "And... He thinks so too."

Sunripple was quiet. He looked down, his tail drooping. "Oh..."

"I'm sorry," She murmured sadly. "I wish I could tell them you're their father, but no one would approve. My clanmates have to believe that they're pure WindClan kits."

"I-I understand," Sunripple meowed quietly. "I just wish I could see them and be a part of their lives."

Dreamwhisper let out a sigh. "Me too." She leaned forward and nuzzled him, and it was quiet.

Iceslide had never felt more awkward and out of place. *I shouldn't be here! This is a private moment.* He looked around at the sky and the reeds awkwardly, searching for something to do or say.

"You should get back to the kits." Sunripple gave her a lick on the ear. "I love you."

She pressed her muzzle into his neck fur. "I love you too." She stepped back and gazed at him for a moment longer before turning and quickly padding back up the moor on the other side of the river.

Sunripple watched until she disappeared over a hill, then gave a little shake. "Right..." He turned and padded back to Iceslide. "Let's go."

They began padding back toward camp side by side. Iceslide wished

he knew what to say to comfort his friend. "You'll see them at gatherings when they're apprenticed," He hesitantly meowed.

"Yeah..." Sunripple looked down. "But I'll just be some RiverClan warrior to them. Nothing more." After a long moment, he looked at him. "Thanks for coming along."

Iceslide nodded, and they continued toward the camp silently through the night. *The pain of being apart from loved ones is unbearable. But when the loved ones don't even know you... That's a pain I hope to never feel.*

Chapter 20

[image]

"Violet?" Iceslide padded through the snow around the twoleg nest, looking around the snowy bushes and bricks hopefully. "Violet!"

Several days had passed since he'd went with Sunripple to meet Dreamwhisper. He knew it was unlikely that he'd find her outside. Kittypets hated the snow and cold. But he hadn't seen her since the morning he'd taken Bone Shred and his rogues to the forest, and he couldn't stop thinking about her. He gave the ground a sniff, but couldn't pick up her scent. *Stupid snow.*

He looked up along the wall of the nest and saw a strange clear wall, like a frozen sheet of ice. He remembered that Juicy once called it a "window". If Violet was inside the nest, maybe he could see her from it.

It's not too high... Iceslide studied it. *Not much different from a fence in a way.* There was a stone ledge just below the window where he could sit, but it wasn't very wide. He wasn't sure it he could fit all four paws on it.

Well, I have to try if I want a chance of seeing Violet. Iceslide crouched, his chest and belly fur brushing against the cold snow. When he'd judged the distance as best he could, he sprang. He made it, but didn't have enough room to land properly.

He let out an "Oof!" as his face slammed into the window, and he nearly fell off the ledge, but quickly stumbled and regained his balance. He had to keep one paw directly in front of the other in order to fit on the ledge. With a huff of relief, he looked through the window.

He'd seen the inside of a twoleg nest before. It was very strange. He saw two couches, a strange cone shaped object that seemed to have a sun inside it, and a wooden table that Iceslide imagined was once

a tree. He continued scanning the room.

Violet!

She was curled up asleep in a strange looking purple thing that looked like a stone, but it was soft. Iceslide decided it was some sort of cushion like the ones he'd seen Juicy and Princess using before. For a moment he admired her beautiful tortoiseshell pelt, unsure if he should wake her. *I didn't come all this way for nothing. She'll be happy to see me.*

He took a last check around the room. He didn't see any twolegs. Maybe they weren't home. He lifted a paw and scratched at the window, surprised at how smooth and strange it felt on his claws. *It's like ice, but different...*

She didn't move, so he scratched again. Her head raised sharply from the cushion, her blue eyes wide as she looked around. Her eyes reached his and lit up, and she quickly hurried over and jumped up on the inside of the windowsill to face him.

"Iceslide!" She exclaimed, her mew muffled by the glass between them. "What are you doing here?"

He purred loudly. "To see you, of course." He wished that he could break through this dumb window and nuzzle her, but just being face to face with her was enough to make him happy. "I've missed you so much!"

Violet's eyes glistened. "I missed you too." She raised her paw and placed it against the glass, and Iceslide placed his in the same place. If only the window wasn't between them, their paws could touch.

"I wish I knew how to open the window and let you in," Violet said sympathetically. "You must be freezing out there."

Iceslide purred in amusement. "I live outside. I'm used to it, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "Crazy clan cat." They laughed, and after a moment she grew serious. "How are we going to make this work? Especially through the winter?"

He tensed. *Is she having doubts about our relationship?* "I'll visit as much as I can," He promised. "It'll be more difficult through leaf-bare, but once new-leaf arrives we can be together all the time. It'll be great!"

Violet blinked at him warmly, and he went on. "It doesn't matter how far apart we are," He told her softly. "We're in love, and that makes us closer than anything."

She looked touched by his words and purred. "You're right. I wish I could nuzzle you, stupid lovable furball."

Iceslide purred in amusement. "Me too." As much as he longed to stay, he knew that he'd been away from camp long enough. He had to get back before he was missed. "I'd better go now."

Her eyes flickered with disappointment, but she purred. "I understand. Take care, Iceslide."

"You too." They gazed at each other for a moment longer before he turned and jumped down from the windowsill, bounding through the powdery snow.

***

When he reached RiverClan territory, it was mid-day. The sky was bright and blotted with so many clouds, the sun was hidden. He was halfway to camp when he realized that he'd better catch something to cover for his absence.

Especially if Frostedcloud noticed. He thought with a flash of annoyance. He wasn't fond of the clan deputy one bit, especially since the time he'd followed him to twolegplace and revealed his secret to the clan. *Let's see him complain when I bring him some mice. That'll please the great one.*

He sniffed the air and picked up the scent of vole. He saw the creature among the snowy roots of a tree. *That'll do.* He dropped into a hunting crouch.

"Iceslide!"

He started at Frostedcloud's yowl and held back a growl of annoyance as the vole scurried away. *Oh, great! Speak of the fox dung!* He stood and turned toward the deputy's voice in frustration. "I was just-"

"Get to camp, now!" He was startled. Frostedcloud's voice was rich with alarm, and he looked more worried than angry. "What are you doing out here alone? Are you mad? You're easy prey for those rogues."

"What's going on?" Iceslide asked anxiously. He could tell by the deputy's expression that this was about more than him being vulnerable.

Frostedcloud hesitated, his eyes clouding. "Come to camp, Iceslide. Another patrol was attacked, and..." He paused, searching for the right words. At last, he sighed. "Your father, Grayshadow... He's dead. Newttail too."

Iceslide's blood chilled with shock. "What?" He choked out. "That can't be!"

The white tom turned away. "Come on, your kin wants you there."

He quickly followed the deputy, his mind spinning. *Grayshadow can't be gone...!* When they reached the camp, he stared.

Every cat seemed to be in the clearing, some talking to each other anxiously, while others hung their heads. Beyond them, Shimmerstar was speaking urgently to Maplesky and Otterpelt, Salmonstripe at her side.

He could almost feel the grief in the atmosphere.

Newttail's body lay in the middle of the camp. His throat was slashed and dark with blood. His siblings, Warmmoss and Duckwing, crouched over him, pressing their heads against his fur. Beyond them, Mudslip and Vixenwhisper sat close together, grieving for their son.

"How could this have happened?" Vixenwhisper wailed in despair. "He was so young! Why did StarClan take him?"

Mudslip pressed against his mate and wrapped his tail around her, his eyes squeezed shut. "I don't know," He rasped and rested his chin on her head.

"Iceslide!" Whitedapple's cry caught his attention, and he snapped his gaze toward it.

No...

His mother was crouched over Grayshadow, a paw rested on his flank as she stared at Iceslide. Her eyes were dull with grief. Winterlight and Blizzardfur were beside her, their heads bowed.

Iceslide hurried over to them, pushing his way through his clanmates. When he reached them, he stopped and stared down at his father's body numbly.

He had a terrible wound in his stomach. Blood clotted his gray fur and pooled into the snow under him. His yellow eyes were half closed and glazed over. *He's really gone...* Iceslide crouched and pressed his nose into his father's cold fur, his heart heavy with grief.

Winterlight raised her head and looked at Iceslide, her yellow eyes glistening. "He... He was out on patrol with Swanpool, Sunripple, Lakesong, and Newttail." She swallowed. "They were ambushed, and..."

"I know." Iceslide moved closer to his sister and pressed against her side. She turned and pressed her head into his fur. He looked up at his brother. "Blizzardfur...?"

"I'm fine." The thick furred white tom swallowed, his eyes clouded with sadness. "He was a great father." He turned and licked Whitedapple's shoulder.

Whitedapple gave a small nod. "He was so proud of you."

Most of us... Iceslide felt a pang of regret. If only he could have been proud of me... If only he'd understood me.

"Cats of RiverClan!" Shimmerstar's voice sounded from nearby, and Iceslide slowly turned. She was standing on the tree stump, her eyes

filled with sadness. "Grayshadow and Newttail were fine cats, and we will hold their vigils tonight. These rogues are a greater threat than we could have imagined. We must find out who they are and stop them."

She turned her gaze to the other side of the clearing, and Iceslide saw the surviving members of the patrol. Swanpool was laying on her stomach, licking blood from her foreleg. Sunripple was wincing as Otterpelt pressed cobwebs to his shoulder, and Lakesong had a cut nose that Maplesky was examining.

"Lakesong." Shimmerstar addressed the oldest of the three. "Can you tell us exactly what happened? As much as you can remember about the attack."

The silver tabby she-cat nodded and slowly sat up as Maplesky stepped back from her, and every cat in the clearing turned to her. "We were patrolling the WindClan border," She began, her mew unsteady with grief. "We were about to start heading back to camp when a group of cats came out of nowhere. They leaped out of the bushes and attacked us."

Lakesong paused as the cats murmured anxiously to one another, then continued. "There were seven of them, so we were outnumbered. The biggest cat had Newttail pinned. I tried to get to him, but two cats attacked me, and I couldn't throw them off. Sunripple attacked one, and I was able to fight off the other. But Newttail was already dead."

Iceslide closed his eyes as he waited to hear about Grayshadow's death. He almost didn't want to. But he had to learn about it sooner or later.

"Swanpool was cornered by three cats, and me and Grayshadow started attacking them and trying to get them away from her. Grayshadow told her to run, but she refused and went to help Sunripple." Lakesong paused and hung her head. "One of the rogues threw me off into the snow, and when I got up, he and the other two had already overpowered Grayshadow. He fought bravely, but... He had no chance."

The clearing was quiet. Iceslide looked at the ground. *Of course Grayshadow would go out fighting. He was a great warrior.* At last, Shimmerstar broke the silence. "Then what happened?"

"After that, there were seven of them and three of us. We thought they would kill us, and I was about to tell Sunripple to run back here for help. But then they just... Left." She sounded puzzled.

The cats murmured anxiously to one another. "Why would they do that?" Dipfoot meowed in confusion. "Why wouldn't they finish you if they had the chance?"

"Right!" Heronleg jumped in. "They're clearly killers!"

"I think it's clear that they meant to give us a warning." Frostedcloud stepped to Shimmerstar's side and stared at the anxious cats around them. "They wanted to show us what they're capable of. And if-"

"Help!" A muffled cry came from the entrance of the camp. "Help!"

Every cat spun to see what was happening, and Iceslide stood, his heart skipping a beat when he saw.

Cherryberry was slowly padding into camp, dragging Divetail by his scruff. The gray tom was limp, his fur streaked with blood. Willowpaw was staggering behind her mentor, pulling Darkpaw's limp body.

"Cherryberry!" Shimmerstar gasped, and she and many other cats raced over as the reddish she-cat dropped Divetail and collapsed into the snow, groaning in pain.

Iceslide joined them, anxious to see what had happened. *Oh, StarClan, no!*

"What happened?" Frostedcloud crouched beside Cherryberry and nudged her gently with his muzzle as she panted. Blood was pooling from her flank. Beyond them, a trail of blood was left by both Divetail and Darkpaw.

"Divetail!" Dipfoot let out a cry and pressed his muzzle into his

brother's bloody fur. "Divetail, no!"

Frozenripple had raced over to Willowpaw, who was bleeding heavily from a wound in the back of her neck. "Oh, Willowpaw!" He gasped and wrapped his fluffy body around his daughter. Petalfin had wailed and rushed over to Darkpaw, covering him with licks. He was trembling, his breathing ragged.

"We... We were training... They at-attacked..." Cherryberry croaked weakly as Maplesky pressed cobwebs to her wounds. "He's dead... Divetail..." She let out a groan and let her head fall into the snow.

Mintpaw was staring at his sister anxiously as she leaned on Frozenripple. Otterpelt was with them, trying to stop the bleeding in her neck.

"It's okay!" Petalfin was sobbing to her daughter. "It'll all be alright!"

Willowpaw looked dazed, as though she wasn't aware of anything happening around her. She looked at her mother once, then choked up a mouthful of blood and collapsed into the snow.

Frozenripple and Petalfin shot down beside her, and Otterpelt felt her flank and gasped. "She's not breathing!"

"No!" Petalfin shrieked.

"Willowpaw!" Mintpaw wailed and sunk down beside her, covering her with licks. "You can't die!" He thrust his nose against his sister's cheek. "No, please!"

She didn't move, her blood sinking into the snow. Mintpaw let out a wail and huddled against his dead sister. Frozenripple hung his head, and Petalfin wailed in grief, pulling Darkpaw close.

Otterpelt was hunched over Willowpaw, staring at her numbly.

"Otterpelt!" Maplesky called to his apprentice, his mew shaky. "Help me get Cherryberry and Darkpaw to the medicine den. We can still save them."

She stepped around the body of the apprentice and crouched beside

the injured she-cat, and she and Maplesky helped her to her paws, staying on either side of her for support.

Cherryberry moaned and looked down past Otterpelt. "Divetail..." She cried.

"He's with StarClan now," Maplesky murmured as they guided her toward the medicine den.

"You don't understand!" Cherryberry cried, hanging her head as blood trickled through her fur. "I just found out I'm having his kits!"

The clearing seemed to go silent, all but Frozenripple and Petalfin's sobbing. Everything about the attacks today had been a complete nightmare. And Iceslide knew with a rush of dread, that this was only the beginning.

Chapter 21

[image]

Snow drifted slowly to the ground. The RiverClan clearing was very quiet. Blizzardfur and Coralshine were sitting outside the warriors den. Coralshine's tail was wrapped around her mate as they watched the snow fall. Shorestep, Troutspots, and Creekleap were clearing snow from the clearing.

Four days had passed since the deaths of Grayshadow, Newttail, and Divetail. Every cat was grieving. But it wasn't all bad news since. Cherryberry's wounds hadn't been too severe, and she had recovered. She'd moved into the nursery, but she wasn't herself. The death of her mate, Divetail, deeply effected her. She was laying in the nursery by the entrance, her chin rested in the moss as she stared out into the clearing.

The other queens, Shallowpool and Heartsong, did their best to comfort her. But nothing seemed to work.

Heartsong was by the fresh kill pile now, her belly plump with kits. She picked out a vole and carried it back to the nursery, resting it in front of Cherryberry. "You need to eat," She meowed.

The reddish she-cat's eyes were dull, and she turned her head away. "What's the point?" She asked quietly. "Divetail's not here. My apprentice is dead. What do I have left?"

"You have your kits." Heartsong settled beside her. "They'll need you."

Cherryberry closed her eyes. "Yours will have a father."

Across the clearing, Frozenripple and Petalfin were looking into the apprentices den. Darkpaw was laying in his nest, his flank rising and falling slowly. Mintpaw was laying near him, his chin rested on his paws. He didn't take his eyes off his brother.

Darkpaw had been very lucky to survive. Many cats, even Maplesky, thought he wouldn't. He'd spent three days in the apprentices den, and Mintpaw had stayed by his side day and night, bringing him fresh prey and water, and keeping him warm. After losing Willowpaw, Mintpaw seemed terribly frightened of losing his brother too.

But Darkpaw had pulled through, proving that he was very strong despite his size. Vixenwhisper had become his new mentor, however he couldn't continue his training for a few more days. Maplesky wanted to be sure that his wounds had properly healed just in case he tore them back open.

Iceslide longed to go see Violet again and get a break from the troubles of the forest. But he feared if he tried, it would be the last thing he ever did. *The rogues would kill a cat out on their own. No doubt.*

He noticed Shimmerstar leave her den, Salmonstripe beside her. The RiverClan leader paused and looked at her mate, her eyes anxious. He gave her a comforting lick on the ear. After a moment, she stepped up onto the tree stump. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!" She called.

The cats slowly gathered and sat down in the clearing, looking up at her. Cherryberry watched quietly from the nursery, while Heartsong stepped outside and sat down, wrapping her tail around her paws. Blizzardfur and Coralshine sat up from where they'd been laying.

Maplesky sat outside the medicine den. Otterpelt followed more slowly, looking anxious and afraid. She caught Iceslide's gaze and held it, her yellow eyes pleading. He was puzzled and awkwardly looked away. *Did she have another vision?*

"Cats of RiverClan," Shimmerstar meowed as Frostedcloud stood beside the stump. "I know you're all worried about the rogue attacks." She paused. "We seem to be safe in our camp. The attacks only happen when we're out on patrol or training apprentices. Until we find a solution, I say that we limit ourselves to two patrols a day, with twice as many cats on each patrol. No cat is to leave the camp alone."

She was met by an uproar of yowls of disbelief and shock. Even Frostedcloud looked surprised, revealing that she hadn't spoken to him about this yet.

"We can't do that!" Troutspots protested. "There's no way we can gather enough prey with just two patrols!"

Ravenfeather spoke up. "That many cats on a hunting patrol would never work! We'd make enough noise to scare everything away from here to fourtrees."

"With all due respect, Shimmerstar, I agree with them." Frostedcloud dipped his head, looking up at her. "Two large patrols wouldn't do any good. Especially in leaf-bare."

"Are we going to make ourselves prisoners in our own territory?" Shorestep asked, her tail lashing. "We can't tiptoe around these rogues and change our whole way of life!"

Many cats meowed they're agreement, and Shimmerstar raised her tail for silence. "I understand, and you're right." She paused, thinking. "But we're outnumbered by them. A small patrol could easily be..." She trailed off, not wanting to finish. She gave herself a shake. "We need to remain strong, but we must also be smart."

"I say we go with Shimmerstar's plan." Maplesky spoke up, and every cat turned to him. "I suggest we speak to the other leaders at the next gathering about the rogue threat. Perhaps we can unite against them. Until then, we'll be careful."

The cats looked at each other uncertainly. "I suppose," Ravenfeather muttered.

"What more can we do?" Dipfoot pointed out quietly.

Shimmerstar dipped her head. "Thank you, Maplesky. I think that's a good idea." She stared down at her clanmates. "From now on, no cat must leave the camp alone. Patrols are to be doubled in size, twice a day."

The clan murmured their agreement, and Shimmerstar gave a nod, preparing to close the meeting.

"Shimmerstar!" Coralshine called. "I know this is a difficult time, but me and Blizzardfur have good news to share." Blizzardfur sat beside her, his blue eyes glowing.

The clan leader paused and dipped her head. "Yes, Coralshine?" Every cat turned to the couple.

Coralshine and Blizzardfur exchanged a warm look before she spoke. "We're expecting kits!"

If times weren't so stressful, the clan would have been delighted and celebrated the news. Only a pawful of cats purred and congratulated the young couple. Coralshine purred and leaned against Blizzardfur, who looked ready to burst with pride and excitement.

Iceslide didn't like kits at all, but nevertheless, he was very happy for his brother. He let out a purr and quickly padded over to them. "I'm so happy for you!" He purred as Winterlight rushed over.

"Congratulations!" She gave Blizzardfur's ear a lick, then bumped her head against Coralshine's.

A loud purr rumbled in Blizzardfur's throat, his blue eyes filled with happiness. "Thanks! I hope I'll be a good father."

"You will be," Coralshine purred and nuzzled his neck fur.

Winterlight nodded, her yellow eyes shining. "You'll be great!"

Of course he will. Iceslide gazed at his brother warmly as Whitedapple purred and licked his shoulder.

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Later that day, Frostedcloud had put him on a hunting patrol. Shimmerstar hadn't been kidding about doubling the patrols in size. Salmonstripe was leading the patrol, and they were joined by Sunripple, Shorestep, Frozenripple, Dipfoot, Risingpaw, Creekleap, and Heronleg.

Hunting was very difficult when they were all trampling about in

the snow. They'd had no choice but to spread out into smaller groups, while staying relatively close to each other. Iceslide and Sunripple were padding close to each other, looking for prey.

Sunripple looked over his shoulder to make sure everyone else was too far away to overhear him, then murmured. "Iceslide, I'm scared."

"Of what?" Iceslide blinked at his friend as they sniffed at a snowy bush. "The rogues won't attack if-"

"No, no." The golden and yellow warrior shook his head, his eyes distant. "WindClan must be having the same problem with them. What if Dreamwhisper and the kits aren't safe?" He stared at him anxiously. "What if..."

Iceslide felt a pang of sympathy and rested his tail on his shoulder. "Dreamwhisper will be fine," He promised. "She's in the nursery, and the rogues don't attack the camps. And I'm sure the warriors are ready to protect her."

Sunripple still looked uneasy. "They haven't attacked the camps *yet.* It won't be long before they do." He shut his eyes. "They're killers. They're heartless. If they saw a queen with kits-"

"Don't think about that," Iceslide cut him off. "It'll only make you more worried." Suddenly, he was grateful for how far away Violet was. She was safe in a twoleg nest. The rogues couldn't hurt her. "Dreamwhisper and the kits will be fine."

"I hope so..." Sunripple murmured, moving forward. "I hope so."

***

A quarter moon passed. Thankfully, there had been no more attacks since the patrols had been doubled. And there was good news for once. Darkminnow and Mintfrost had been made warriors. Though they were happy about it, every cat knew that one cat was missing. Willowpaw should have been made a warrior with them.

"StarClan will have welcomed her as a warrior," Shimmerstar had assured them. "She was very brave."

Iceslide was crouched by the side of the clearing, taking bites from a small mouse. Suddenly, A golden blur shot past him, and he jumped. "Creekleap, slow down!" He exclaimed.

"Sorry!" Creekleap called over his shoulder and disappeared into the nursery.

Just a few days ago, Heartsong had given birth to her kits, Frostkit, Wetkit, and Tansykit. Creekleap had been running around like he was on catnip ever since, visiting his kits as often as possible and making sure Heartsong had everything she needed.

Blizzardfur had been in the nursery a lot too since Coralshine had moved in. Iceslide finished his mouse and rested his chin on his paws. *At least something good is-*

"Shimmerstar!" Salmonstripe called from the cap entrance, and Iceslide raised his head. "SkyClan has sent a message."

The reddish warrior was padding into camp, followed by a black and brown tabby tom. Iceslide recognized him as Stagleap. He'd spoken to him before at gatherings.

Shimmerstar emerged from her den and padded forward to meet them, dipping her head. "Greetings. What's happened?"

"Shimmerstar, another SkyClan patrol was attacked." Stagleap's amber eyes were filled with unease. "Tanpelt was killed."

The RiverClan leader nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry to hear that. RiverClan has lost warriors as well."

"Whitestar wants to know if you've learned anything about them since the last gathering," Stagleap meowed.

Shimmerstar sighed. "I'm afraid not. We've been doubling our patrols, and I advise that Whitestar does the same. The more cats, the better."

Stagleap nodded and turned away.

"Salmonstripe, gather some cats and escort Stagleap back to the

SkyClan border," Shimmerstar meowed. "Just in case the rogues are about."

"Thank you." Stagleap dipped his head, and he and the others left.

If only we knew who they were and how to get rid of them. Iceslide thought. It would be helpful to know someone who might know. He suddenly remembered that he knew Sulfur, as well as Bone Shred's cats. *Maybe they know something!*

He looked around hesitantly. No cat was allowed to leave the camp alone. *But that never stopped me before, did it? And they'll thank me if I can learn some useful information. That is, if I don't get killed first.* He decided that it was worth the risk. He checked that no one was watching, then turned and stepped through a gap in the reeds.

***

He padded along the snowy slope outside of ThunderClan territory, looking around. He'd never been to Sulfur's den, but it had to be around here. It can't be much further. He continued onward.

"Iceslide?"

He heard someone call him from a distance and looked toward the sound. A familiar yellow cat was trudging through the snow toward him.

"Sulfur!" Iceslide quickly changed direction and went to meet him.

When they reached each other, the yellow tom stared at him in confusion. "What are you doing out here?"

"I wanted to talk to you," Iceslide meowed. "Do you know about the rogues causing trouble around here?"

Sulfur narrowed his eyes. "Oh, I know plenty. I've seen their attacks and heard the cries of their victims." He shook his head sadly. "The forest isn't a safe place anymore. It's full of bloodshed." He hesitated. "That's why I've decided to leave."

"What?" Iceslide was startled. "But... This is your home."

The yellow tom shook his head. "Not anymore. I'm going to head east and find a new den. Somewhere with lots of food, where there's peace."

Iceslide's tail drooped as he began to understand what he was saying. "I won't see you again," He meowed quietly.

Sulfur's yellow eyes were filled with sadness. "I'm sorry, Iceslide. I've already said goodbye to Truffle."

"You could join RiverClan," Iceslide suggested desperately. "You'd make a great warrior."

To his disappointment, Sulfur shook his head. "I'm a loner. Besides, the clans are the ones the rogues have the problem with. I want no part in it." He stared at Iceslide for a long moment. "You've been a great friend, and I'll miss you. Good luck, Iceslide."

Sulfur turned away, and Iceslide stared after him. It was almost as if he were losing a part of himself. He and Sulfur had been friends for a long time. *I can't believe I'll never see him again...*

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When Iceslide reached Bone Shred's camp, he was surprised at how many cats were there. There were many dens and clusters of cats everywhere. In the trees, on rocks, in dens. *Were there that many before?*

"Iceslide," Bone Shred purred a greeting from where he sat on his log. This time, he didn't come down to meet him, and Iceslide stopped a little ways away from it, looking up at him. "How good of you to visit."

He realized that a lot of cats were watching the meeting. Crimson Ice and Dark Hawk stepped closer. Poisoned Sap was studying him from beyond the log, her amber eyes gleaming. Shredded Ivy and Oil Tail were near her. They watched, expressionless.

Iceslide's pelt prickled with unease, and he tried to calm himself. I've been visiting a lot. They're just curious. "Bone Shred, some rogues have been attacking the clans lately," He meowed. "Cats

have been killed."

Bone Shred tilted his skull covered head. "Is that so? I'm sorry to hear that." He looked downward. "Death is very cruel, indeed," He murmured.

"Yes." Iceslide stared up into the dark sockets of the skull. "I was wondering if you knew anything about it."

Dark Hawk leaped to his paws and bared his teeth. "Are you accusing us?" He spat, and several other cats growled, tails lashing.

"No, of course not!" He exclaimed quickly, flashing a quick look at the tom before returning his attention to Bone Shred. "I just figured that you're rogues too, and you might know who they are, or where they come from."

Bone Shred was quiet for a moment, the tip of his tail twitching. "We've met a few of them ourselves," He meowed calmly. "They're a threat indeed. I wish I could help, but I'm afraid I don't know any more than you do."

Iceslide couldn't have been more disappointed. He'd been hoping to learn something useful that could be used against them. But it seemed Bone Shred's cats were in the same position as the clans. "I understand. I'm sorry you've had trouble with them too." He suddenly had an idea. "You have a lot of cats here, don't you?"

"Yes." Bone Shred studied him. "Why?"

"Would you be willing to help us?" Iceslide asked hopefully. "If you joined forces with our clans in a fight against the rogues, we'd be unstoppable. We could drive them out!" He exclaimed excitedly.

Bone Shred stood up. "Yes!" He sounded just as pleased with the idea. "You're very smart, Iceslide." He paused as he thought. "Suppose I sent a pawful of my cats to each clan to help with hunting and protection? Say, ten per clan?"

Iceslide lifted his tail into the air. "That's great! And then we could all fight them off together!"

"That's right," Bone Shred purred, his tail waving back and forth slowly. "We could save the forest and reveal who's in charge. After all, it's the least we could do after all you've done for us."

Iceslide nodded, and Bone Shred went on. "I just need to know where the camp of each clan is."

He hesitated. "You could just wait by the border for a patrol," He pointed out.

"You know how dangerous being out in the territories are with the rogues about," Bone Shred reminded him. "We wouldn't want to risk any more losses. We'll go straight to the camps ourselves."

Iceslide considered this. *He's right. We can't risk it.* And so, he did something that he would regret for the rest of his life. Something that no other warrior would have done lightly.

He revealed the locations of the camps.

Bone Shred nodded slowly as he spoke. "I'll try to remember that. Thank you. We'll leave for the clans tomorrow morning."

"Surely I should tell Shimmerstar you're coming?" Iceslide meowed uncertainly.

"The clans have had a lot of bad news lately." Bone Shred gazed at him. "I think they could use a nice surprise."

He couldn't agree more. "Thank you, Bone Shred," He dipped his head. "We won't forget this."

"I have no doubt about that," Bone Shred replied coolly.

Iceslide hesitated. "I'd better get going. I want to visit the kittypets and warn them." He turned and began padding away.

"Iceslide."

He paused and looked over his shoulder.

Bone Shred's dark, empty gaze was fixed on him as he spoke. "Your

loyalty should stay with me."

What? Iceslide blinked, puzzled. *What's wrong with being friends with the kittypets?* For a minute, he wasn't sure what to say. "My loyalty is to all of my friends," He responded.

When Bone Shred didn't respond, Iceslide continued and padded out of the camp. *At last, we have a way to fight against the rogues!* He couldn't help but feel quite proud of himself. *The clans will be saved because of me.*

Allegiance Update #6

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Whitedapple - White she-cat with silver speckles, blue eyes.

Salmonstripe - Reddish tabby tom with a white streak down his back, green eyes.

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Shorestep - Sandy gray-brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lakesong - Silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Risingpaw

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dovepaw

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Arcticpaw

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Fintail - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Darkminnow - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintfrost - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Apprentices

Arcticpaw - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovepaw- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingpaw - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Queens

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes. Mother to Dipfoot's kits:

Thunderkit - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Eelkit - Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes and a sleek tail.

Ruskakit - Tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes.

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Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes. Mother to Creekleap's kits:

Frostkit - Mottled pale brown and white speckled tom with a white face and legs, blue eyes.

Wetkit - Dark gray and white tom with amber eyes.

Tansykit - Light golden brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

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Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes. Expecting Divetail's kits.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Apprentices

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes. Mother to Stormstar's kits:

Dewkit - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondkit - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Spicepaw

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Snowtuft- Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices:

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Spicepaw - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Bouldercrash - Broad shouldered light gray and white tom with yellow eyes.

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Windwhisker - Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Dappledawn - Pale golden spotted she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Willowpaw- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Queens

Dreamwhisper - Creamy white she-cat with pale green eyes. Mother to Weaselnose's kits:

Starkit - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingkit - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalkit - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Bone Shred's Gang

Leader: Bone Shred - Broad shouldered black tom with three white stripes on each of his sides. Wears a fox skull on his head.

Rogues:

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Crimson Ice - White tom with red paws, chest blaze, muzzle, ears, and stripe down spine, long scar across his eye, amber eyes.

Shredded Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with black paws, dark green eyes.

Dark Hawk - Black tom with green eyes.

Shadow Snarl - Thick furred black tom with amber eyes.

Patch Swipe - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Blinding Sun - Orange and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Glass Face - Silver tom with several cuts on his face, blue eyes.

Oil Tail - Siamese tom with blue eyes.

Heart Burn - Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Howl - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandelion - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Bristle - Spiky furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Glitter - Thin ginger tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Dark Hawk's kits:

Scrappy - Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Sunny - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skipper - Small lighter brown tabby tom with small white patches and light blue-green eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Juicy - Plump orange and white tom with yellow eyes. Wears a red collar.

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Princess - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes. Wears a blue collar.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 22

[image]

"What have you done?"

A voice whispered in his ear, and he gasped, spinning around. "Who's there?" He was standing on the frozen river, the ice smooth under his paws. He looked around the snowy banks, but couldn't see any other cat near him, let alone beside him.

"It's begun, Iceslide." He froze as the voice breathed in his ear again, cold as a frosty breeze. "What have you done? What have you done?"

Iceslide backed away, his heart pounding with fear. "Where are you?" He gasped. "What did I do?"

More whispers joined in from all around him. "What have you done? What have you done?" They repeated over and over, and Iceslide cowered to the ice in terror. *Stop! Go away! Somebody-*

"Help! Somebody help!"

The wail jolted him awake, and he raised his head, gasping out. For a heartbeat, he thought that the wail had been a part of the dream. But around him, cats had awoken. *Did I wail in my sleep? Was it me?* But his denmates paid no attention to him. Most were leaping out of their nests and hurrying into the clearing, while others just stared after them anxiously.

"Please, help us!" The voice cried from the clearing, and Iceslide rose and stumbled out of his nest, still shaken by his nightmare.

He'd almost reached the entrance when Dipfoot pushed past him, nearly knocking him over. "Sorry!" He called over his shoulder. Iceslide gave his pelt a shake before following him out into the clearing. It was very early morning, and the sky was still dark. Fresh snow covered the ground, and heavy flurries drifted from the

sky.

A small golden-brown and black tabby was standing by the entrance of the camp, breathing heavily. Blood streamed from his shoulder, and his snow speckled fur was bristling with fear. Iceslide picked up the scent of WindClan.

"Driftpaw?" Shimmerstar had just reached the apprentice, Frostedcloud and Salmonstripe following quickly. "What's-"

"You have to help us!" The WindClan apprentice cried, his amber eyes lit with terror. "Please, our camp is under attack! It's the rogues!" He was nearly tripping over his words he was speaking so fast. "We're outnumbered, it's bad! My father is already badly wounded, and my mentor, Windwhisker, is dead!"

Cats murmured anxiously, and Shimmerstar exchanged an uneasy look with Frostedcloud.

"You have to come!" Driftpaw pleaded desperately. "Please, hurry!"

"We will." Shimmerstar promised and turned quickly to her warriors, scanning the nearest cats. "Salmonstripe, Mudslip, Sunripple, Shorestep, Warmmoss, Iceslide-" She paused as more cats hurried out into the open. "Winterlight and Heronleg, you too."

As the warriors gathered, Iceslide among them, Shimmerstar turned to her deputy. "Frostedcloud, make sure the camp is guarded while we're gone," She ordered, and the white tom nodded before rushing away to a group of warriors.

Driftpaw's tail was twitching back and forth in impatience and fear as Shimmerstar turned to him. "Lead the way," She ordered, and the apprentice spun and raced out of camp, Shimmerstar and the others following.

How many rogues are there? Iceslide wondered anxiously as he ran with his clanmates through the snow. *They outnumber a whole clan!*

"Oh, StarClan!" He became aware of Sunripple running alongside him, his voice rich with fear. "I hope Dreamwhisper is okay!"

Iceslide didn't respond as they headed across the frozen river. He wished he could reassure him that she was, but these rogues were merciless. He didn't want to make a promise he couldn't keep.

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As they neared the camp, they were surprised to find it quiet. There was no sound of screeching, snarling, or any other sounds of battle. But as they got closer, they could see that the gorse tunnel was half destroyed. The rogues had certainly been there, but the battle was over. They were too late.

Did they drive the rogues off? Iceslide wondered anxiously.

When they neared the damaged gorse tunnel, Shimmerstar hesitated, raising her tail for her cats to stop. When she decided it was safe, she led the way into the camp.

They were met by a horrible scene. There were cats loosely scattered around the clearing, most wounded. Two warriors were crouched over the body of Bouldercrash, while another wailed over the body of a golden she-cat. Beyond them, there were at least two more bodies. The sandy ground was stained with blood.

Driftpaw let out a cry and bolted forward. "Fallenhope, no!" He ran across the clearing to the body of the tabby warrior and pressed his muzzle into his fur, sobbing.

That must be his father. Iceslide thought, his heart filled with sorrow. I know how it feels to lose one...

Shimmerstar turned to her warriors. "Try to help the wounded if you can," She meowed quietly. "Hivepelt and Silverberry would appreciate the help."

The RiverClan warriors quickly began mingling with the WindClan cats. Iceslide saw Sunripple head straight for the nursery. *I hope Dreamwhisper isn't hurt.*

Gladestar was sitting by the body of Windwhisker, her head bowed. When she noticed the RiverClan cats, she stood. "Shimmerstar," She rasped and padded over slowly, her eyes dull with sadness. "Thank

you for coming. But I'm afraid it's too late."

As the leaders spoke, Iceslide froze when he spotted Soakedears crouched over Firetail, and immediately rushed over to his friends. "Are you guys okay?" He gasped.

Soakedears looked up at him, blood trickling from a cut in his muzzle. "I'm okay," He rasped. "Firetail is hurt badly."

"I'm fine!" Firetail lay on his side, coughing and shivering. Blood pooled under him from wounds in his shoulder and chest. "You should have seen the other guy."

"No!" A wail came from across the clearing, and Iceslide recognized Sunripple's voice. He looked up sharply and saw him half inside the nursery.

Iceslide's stomach filled with dread, and he ran over to his side, ducking into the den. *Oh no...*

It was a terrible sight. Dreamwhisper lay in her nest, blood soaking into the moss under her. Her throat had been torn open, and her eyes were sightless, her mouth parted and lips curled back in a snarl. She'd been trying to protect her kits. Beyond her lay another dead queen. She had no kits, not yet anyway. It looked like she'd been expecting.

"Oh, Dreamwhisper, no!" Sunripple sobbed in grief, hanging his head.

In front of Dreamwhisper's body, the three kits were mewling and wailing in despair, huddling against their mothers body. *Starkit, Blazingkit, and Petalkit.*

"Why won't she wake up?" Petalkit cried while her siblings prodded Dreamwhisper's body anxiously.

Starkit let out a wail. "Dreamwhisper's hurt!"

Sunripple let out a cry and immediately started forward to comfort his kits, but a ginger tom suddenly pushed in the way, shoving him backwards. Iceslide quickly backed away.

"Get away from the nursery, fish face!" He spat.

Sunripple stumbled back in surprise. "I was-"

"I said, get away!" The WindClan tom snarled, lashing his tail. "I won't let you touch my kits!"

That must be Weaselnose. Iceslide realized. *The cat that the clan thinks is the father of Dreamwhisper's kits. The cat that HE thinks is the father.* He looked aside at Sunripple uneasily.

"Your kits?" Sunripple bristled, and suddenly his eyes blazed with fury. "You let me in!" He started forward, but Weaselnose pushed him backwards with a furious snarl. Beyond him, the kits were crying against Dreamwhisper's body.

Sunripple snarled and stepped back toward him, but Iceslide shouldered him away. "No," He meowed quietly. "You can't-"

"Those are my kits!" Sunripple's fury melted into anguish as he struggled, but Iceslide forced him back. "My kits are crying. My..." His voice trailed off into a cry.

"Sunripple, it has to be this way," Iceslide's heart ached for his friend. "Weaselnose will take care of them."

The gold and yellow tabby gave up and hung his head, leaning against Iceslide. "I wish they knew the truth!" He sobbed.

"I know," Iceslide murmured as he rested his tail around him and gently guided the sobbing tom away.

In the middle of the clearing, Shimmerstar was still speaking with Gladestar. The WindClan leader's eyes were filled with loss. "It was horrible," She rasped. "They attacked while we were asleep. Killed the guards. We were caught completely off guard."

"Were you able to learn anything about them?" The RiverClan leader asked, resting a paw on Gladestar's shoulder. "Have you seen them before, any of them?"

The golden tabby she-cat stared back at her. "Since I've become

leader of WindClan, I've been trying to remain confident. But these rogues..." She swallowed.

Shimmerstar waited, and after a moment Gladestar gathered herself and continued. "Shimmerstar, these rogues are like nothing I've ever seen. The *clans* have never seen. And certainly not their leader."

Iceslide stared at the WindClan leader curiously. At last, we know something! Who is this leader?

"You won't believe me, I hardly believe it myself, but..." Gladestar stared at her. "Their leader wears a skull on his head."

Cold dread shot through Iceslide's veins like ice, numbing him from ears to tail tip. *No... Oh, no, no....* He staggered backwards, and Sunripple turned to him, asking if he was alright, but he hardly heard. He looked around the bloody clearing at the wounded cats and felt his heart pounding and his legs trembling.

I caused this...

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Not long after they returned to camp, Iceslide had gone straight to twolegplace. He had to warn his friends about Bone Shred and his rogues. He didn't know if any were still lingering around there. The thought of something happening to Violet filled him with dread.

All day his mind had been racing with a million thoughts and feelings. He was stunned by the fact that Bone Shred's cats had been terrorizing the clans, but also by his own stupidity. *I led a group of bloodthirsty rogues straight to the clans... I told them everything they needed to know in order to attack... What was I thinking? How could I have fallen for it?*

Snow was falling heavily to the ground. He ducked through the gap in the fence and stepped into Juicy's yard, looking around. But he saw no sign of his friend. "Juicy?" He called as he padded through the snow. "Juicy, are you out?" When he was answered by silence, he sighed and hurried onward along the side of the nest. One of them has to be around here!

"Violet! Princess! Parrot!" Iceslide called as he reached the front yard, scanning his surroundings. Are they all inside? He was about to try calling them again when he spotted Parrot. The small kittypet was laying on the top step of a twoleg nest, his chin on his paws.

"Parrot!" Iceslide ran over and padded up the steps.

The kittypet's eyes flicked up to him, and he was surprised to see how sad he looked. "Iceslide. Hi."

"What's wrong?" He asked worriedly, sitting beside him. Parrot was the most cheerful, funny cat he knew. It was unlike him to be upset. "Are you okay?"

Parrot was quiet for a moment. Then he spoke. "It's terrible... Those rogues, the shady looking ones you were with earlier this moon? A bunch of them came back."

No! Iceslide's stomach churned anxiously. "What happened?" He rasped.

"They killed Juicy..." Parrot said quietly. "T-they split his stomach open..." His voice cracked. "And then Princess... They wounded her so badly. Her housefolk took her to the vet, but it was too late. She had to be put down." He dropped his gaze.

No, no, no... Iceslide let out a sob of grief and hung his head. "I'm so sorry..." He rasped.

"Iceslide, they... They told us they did it to... thank you for your help..." Parrot slowly looked up at him, his green eyes filled with sadness. "What did you do...? Why would you help them?"

He hung his head, shame and sorrow flooding through him. "I-I didn't mean to..."

Parrot stared at him numbly. "There's more... After that, they took Dime and Truffle as prisoners. I don't know why." The little tom moaned. "Oh, it's a nightmare here. Things used to be so peaceful, and now..."

"I'm so sorry, Parrot..." Iceslide gave him a lick on the head, his

heart throbbing with grief and guilt. "I'm sorry..." He swallowed. "Violet...?"

"Violet's okay." The kittypet said to his relief. "She stays inside a lot, but her housefolk let her out now and then. She's been wanting to see you."

After saying goodbye to Parrot, Iceslide began heading for Violet's nest. He couldn't believe what the rogues had done in twolegplace. And it was all his fault. He was anxious about Truffle and Dime. I have to get to them. I won't let them die too.

When he reached Violet's home, he jumped onto the windowsill and peered inside hopefully. He spotted her on the couch and scratched at the window. She raised her head and padded over, jumping up to see him. "Hello, Iceslide." She meowed quietly.

"Violet, are you okay?" He stared at her through the glass. "I'm so sorry about Juicy and Princess."

She nodded, her blue eyes filled with sadness. "I'll be okay. Iceslide, I..." She stared at him. "My housefolk have decided to keep me inside permanently. With the deaths of other kittypets in the neighborhood, they're afraid to let me out."

Iceslide grew uneasy. "What are you saying?"

"We can't see each other anymore." Violet's eyes were filled with sorrow. "The world is too dangerous out there for me. In here, I'm safe and warm and cared for."

"No!" Iceslide stared at her desperately, his heart aching. "There has to be a way!"

"Stay with me," Violet meowed, her eyes pleading. "You could live out the rest of your days in peace. We could be together all the time, and you'd be safe."

His heart was screaming at him to say yes. But to live out the rest of his days trapped in a twoleg nest would be a nightmare, even if Violet was with him. He'd miss everything about being outside and free. He could never explore ever again.

He met her gaze numbly. "I can't." His voice cracked, and he swore his heart did too. "I'm so sorry..."

Violet's eyes flooded with sadness. "Then... I guess this is goodbye..."

Oh, Violet... Iceslide stared at her, wishing there wasn't a window between them. He longed to nuzzle her and feel her against him one last time. But that would never happen again now. "Violet, I... I love you."

"I love you too, Iceslide. Please take care." Violet's eyes glistened, and they stared at each other for a long moment, reluctant to look away.

After what felt like moons, Iceslide forced himself to turn away. He leaped down from the windowsill and slowly padded through the snow, his heart broken as he left the cat he loved forever.

Chapter 23

[image]

The sun was setting over the snowy landscape, turning the sky a pale orange. Iceslide trudged through the snow and wind as flurries fell onto his fur, shivering. He was freezing and exhausted. He couldn't believe that just this morning, WindClan had been attacked. It felt like moons ago. The day was painfully long, and so much had happened.

But it's not over yet. Iceslide thought and forced his tired legs onward. *I need to confront Bone Shred and get him to let Truffle and Dime go!* He was dying to take a break, but he couldn't waste any time when he didn't know what the rogues were doing with his friends.

He raised his head and squinted as snow blew into his face. He could see the trees of the woodland just ahead of him. *Almost there.* He continued, and it wasn't long before he was there. He was relieved that the trees were beginning to shelter him from the wind. *The camp isn't far now!*

He was about to start heading through the woodland when two cats stepped out from the snowy bushes in front of him. Poisoned Sap and Shredded Ivy.

"Hello, Iceslide," Poisoned Sap purred smoothly. "We thought you'd stop by."

He felt his neck fur bristle with anger. "I know all about you now!" He hissed. "Murderers!"

Shredded Ivy looked amused. "You need to relax. You're acting crazy."

"I'm not playing games with you!" Iceslide snapped, unable to contain his frustration. "You have Truffle and Dime, and you're going to let them go."

Poisoned Sap's amber eyes flashed to his claws, but she looked more amused than worried. "Now, Iceslide, you wouldn't attack a couple of innocent she-cats, would you?"

"You're far from innocent!" Iceslide retorted, his tail lashing madly. "You-"

Shredded Ivy padded forward and wove around him, arching her back. "Don't be silly. You're a great friend of ours." She circled him, her fur brushing against him, and he stiffened. "Maybe even more than a friend." She murmured and licked his ear, and Iceslide shrank back from her, growling lowly.

"What do you say we go hunting together, just the three of us?" Poisoned Sap purred. "We-"

"I'm not falling for your tricks!" Iceslide felt something inside him snap, and he raised his paws and pushed Shredded Ivy away from him, bristling. "I'm going to get my friends!" He started forward between them.

Weight slammed into his shoulder, and he huffed out in surprise as he was thrust onto his side into the snow. He shook snow from his whiskers and saw Poisoned Sap standing over him, her eyes gleaming. "You're not going anywhere," She sneered. "I'm afraid you're not welcome in our camp anymore."

"You told us all we needed to know, and we're very grateful." Shredded Ivy stepped closer and crouched by Iceslide's head. "You promised us a better life here, and you delivered."

"Get off!" Iceslide twisted onto his back and pushed his paws against Poisoned Sap's chest, surprised at her strength. He grunted as she thrust him back down.

Poisoned Sap dug her claws into his shoulders. "We have everything we need here. We just need to get some cats out of our way." Her eyes glittered. "I took care of that fat kittypet friend of yours. He didn't put up a fight, the soft furball."

Juicy! Iceslide growled angrily, and she went on. "Grayshadow, he

was a bit more difficult."

"No!" He snarled and kicked her hard in the stomach, knocking her away from him. *She killed my father!* Before she could get up, he lunged at her and pinned her. "How dare you!" He hissed furiously.

Poisoned Sap's amber eyes gleamed up at him. "You'd better get back to camp, Iceslide. That is, if there's still a camp to go back to." Beyond her, Shredded Ivy chuckled.

With a start, he realized what was going on. *They're trying to distract me! RiverClan is under attack!* He leaped away from Poisoned Sap and raced off out of the woodland, just hearing Shredded Ivy purr "Let him go".

He ran as fast as he could against the blizzard, snow rushing into his face, but he hardly felt it. After seeing what Bone Shred and his rogues had done to WindClan, he was terrified to see what his own clan was suffering. *Oh, StarClan, give me speed!* He silently begged as he crossed back into RiverClan territory.

The world blurred around him as he raced through the snow, his mind spinning. *Please, please let everything be okay!* In his dizzy state, he stumbled over the stepping stones, a hind paw slipping onto the ice before he ran through the gap in the reed barrier.

In an instant, his worst nightmare raged before his own eyes. The camp had become a battlefield. Cats were fighting madly all around him, the snow speckled with drops of blood, tufts of fur scattered among it.

Mudslip was fighting shoulder to shoulder with Vixenwhisper, matching his mate blow for blow as they fought against Dark Hawk and Patch Swipe. Patch Swipe let out a snarl and lunged for the golden she-cat, throwing her to the ground, and Mudslip started toward her only to be knocked aside by Dark Hawk.

Frostedcloud was fighting beside Shimmerstar near her den, his blue eyes blazing with fury. His white pelt was streaked with blood.

"Stay back!" Dipfoot was guarding the nursery where Shallowpool and his kits were, his fur fluffed up so that he looked twice his size. Oil Tail and Glass Face faced him, hissing and snarling.

Shorestep leaped to his side and bared her teeth. "I can take them!" She spat. "Get Shallowpool and the kits somewhere safe!"

The gray warrior looked at his ex-mate in surprise. They'd always been hostile toward each other since they'd stopped being mates. But now, she was willing to fight to protect his new family. "There are two of them-"

"You think I'm too weak, do you?" Shorestep shot him an angry glare. "I said get them out of here! Go, you mouse-brain!"

Dipfoot stared at her for a moment, then turned and ran into the nursery. Oil Tail started after him, but Shorestep snarled and cannoned into the thin tom, knocking him aside and slashing her claws across his shoulder. Glass Face lunged at the sandy she-cat and sank his teeth into her shoulder, and she yowled in pain as the two rogues overpowered her.

Behind her, Dipfoot was running out of the nursery with Shallowpool and their kits, leading them through the reeds behind the nursery. Right now, they were safer outside the camp than inside.

No, no, no! Giving himself a shake, Iceslide forced his shocked body to race into battle. He leaped at Glass Face and knocked him away from Shorestep, hissing angrily. "Get out of this camp, fleabag!"

The scar-faced rogue sneered and reared, slashing his claws across Iceslide's chest. "If you didn't want us here, why'd you tell us where it was?"

He was about to attack again when Winterlight tackled the rogue, snarling. "I'll take care of him!"

Iceslide heard a cry nearby and turned, gasping out. Oil Tail was raising his head from Shorestep, his chin dripping with blood. The sandy she-cat was laying dead with a wound in her neck, her eyes

wide and glazed.

He started toward Oil Tail when a wail of agony rose from behind him. He spun and felt his heart skip a beat as panic seized his body, freezing him. No!

Bone Shred was close to the middle of the clearing, grasping Whitedapple's shoulders as she struggled to push him up away from her. The rogue's jaws had fastened deep into her throat, blood oozing down her neck and through her white fur. Her wail broke into a bubbled choke as she collapsed, and the black tom released her, stepping back and looking down in satisfaction.

"No!" Iceslide let out a screech and shouldered his way through the battle, lunging for Bone Shred.

But the rogue leader seemed completely prepared for his attack. He turned toward him and raised his front paws to meet him, shoving Iceslide to the snowy ground beside Whitedapple's body. Before he could get up, Bone Shred pinned him down and pressed a paw to his throat, his unsheathed claws pricking his skin.

"What's wrong, Iceslide?" He meowed smoothly, the dark sockets of the skull stared down at him. "I thought we were friends?"

Iceslide became hardly aware of the battle going on around him. Right now, his entire focus was on Bone Shred and the hatred and despair flooding through his body. "You murderer!" He snarled furiously. "How dare you! I helped you! I saved your cats from starvation! "

The black tom watched him calmly, his chin and skull stained with blood. "And I'm very grateful for your help. I must thank you." He broke into a purr, gazing around the clearing at the raging battle. "None of this could have happened if it weren't for you."

He let out a cry of mingled anger and anguish, pouring out his emotions into his words. "You tricked me! You lied to me, and-"

"I never lied to you, Iceslide." Bone Shred rested his empty, dark gaze back down on him. "My cats were starving, and we needed

new territory. It was all truth." He paused. "You're just a fool. We wanted the forest, and you led us straight to it, gave us all the information we needed to properly plan our attacks." He let out an amused purr. "It was surprisingly easy. You never even asked what we planned to do when we got here."

Iceslide stared up at him, trembling with anger and guilt. "You're a heartless, mangy fleabag!" He hissed out.

"And you're the stupidest cat I've ever met." Bone Shred chuckled. "It's a miracle you're still alive." He leaned closer to Iceslide's face so that he was forced to stare into the shadowy depths of the skull he wore. "This is only the beginning, Iceslide. One by one, we will kill them all, until the forest is ours. And it's all thanks to you." He raised his head and studied him.

Iceslide glared up at him, his heart pounding. *He's going to kill me!* He tensed, waiting for the big tom to lunge down and sink his teeth into his throat.

But Bone Shred smiled, his grip on Iceslide loosening. "I'll let you live, my friend. It would be wrong to kill you before you could see the glory that you helped us achieve. You'll be proud of the part you played in it." The black tom stepped back off of him and yowled. "That's enough! Let's go!"

The rogues began retreating, and Iceslide slowly got to his paws, stumbling up in the snow. He watched Bone Shred lead his cats across the stepping stones until they disappeared over a snowy slope.

They're gone... He looked down and realized that he was standing in blood. His mother's blood. He stepped backwards, leaving bloody pawprints in the snow. *Whitedapple...* He hung his head as he stared at her body. *I'm so sorry...*

"Lakesong!"

Iceslide slowly turned and saw Frozenripple crouching by the silver and white she-cat, pressing his nose into her fur. Blood ran from her throat. *She was his sister...* He remembered how Lakesong had talked

about wanting kits, but never finding the right mate. *Now it'll definitely never happen.*

He looked around the blood-stained clearing. *No...* Shorestep lay dead by the nursery. Dipfoot, Shallowpool, and their kits were returning. When they saw the body, Shallowpool quickly guided her kits into the den, trying to keep them from seeing. Dipfoot stared at the dead she-cat numbly for a long moment before following.

Ravenfeather was crouched beside his apprentice, Arcticpaw, who had a nasty wound in his flank. He slumped against the black tom and moaned.

Not far from him, Heronleg was licking Fintail's ear, which was torn and bloody.

Maplesky and Otterpelt had rushed out into the clearing, carrying bundles of cobwebs and herbs. They stopped and looked around as if not knowing where to begin. There were many cats with terrible wounds. Both medicine cats bore scratches. Even they had no choice but to engage in the battle.

Sunripple and Swanpool crouched beside Salmonstripe, who lay motionless, his fur streaked with blood.

He's dead... Iceslide swallowed. *So much blood... So much death...*

"Iceslide?"

He slowly turned, feeling dazed with shock as he looked at Creekleap. The golden tabby tom was staring at him with a wary look on his face. Beside him, Troutspots was lashing his tail slowly.

"What did he mean...?" Creekleap rasped, and Iceslide realized with a rush of dread that he'd heard some of his confrontation with Bone Shred. "You helped him?"

Troutspots let out a snarl. "Traitor!"

No! Iceslide staggered backwards. "N-no, I-"

"Maplesky! Otterpelt! Hurry!" Frostedcloud's yowl made every cat

turn their attention to the far side of the clearing. Iceslide drew in a shaky gasp. *No!*

The deputy was crouched beside Shimmerstar. Her dappled silver fur was stained with pools of blood, and she was motionless. "She died twice!" Frostedcloud stammered, his blue eyes lit with fear. "She hasn't woken up yet."

The medicine cats immediately hurried over to examine Shimmerstar, and Creekleap let out a cry, running to join Frostedcloud beside his mother.

Iceslide took a step toward them, ignoring Troutspots' growl behind him. No! Please, she has to be okay!

"She has more lives left, right?" Creekleap stared at the medicine cats as they pressed cobwebs to her wounds. "Right?"

Maplesky hesitated. This information usually wasn't shared with the clan. "I think so," He meowed quietly, trying to stay calm, but his voice shook. "Give her a few moments. StarClan will bring her back."

A pawful of cats gathered around, staring at their leader anxiously. Most others were tending to their wounds or sobbing over the bodies of their loved ones.

Iceslide felt completely stunned. He felt dazed, as if everything happening around him wasn't real. It couldn't be real. How could something so horrible be real? He let his gaze drift across the clearing, at all the blood, the bodies of Whitedapple, Salmonstripe, Shorestep, and Lakesong. *They'd all be alive if I hadn't brought the rogues here... This is all my fault...*

"Maplesky..." Shimmerstar's croak caught his attention, and he returned his gaze to her. She had risen her head, her eyes dazed as she returned to the world of the living. "I'm okay..."

Frostedcloud let out a sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan!" Beside him, Creekleap licked her head. The other cats let out sighs and murmurs of relief.

The RiverClan leader started to rise, but Maplesky rested his paw on her shoulder. "Relax for a few moments," He urged. "You need time to recover."

"No." She ignored the medicine cat and staggered to her paws, and Frostedcloud and Creekleap stayed on either side of her in case she fell. "The clan needs me." She slowly moved her gaze across her distressed clan. She let out a cry when she caught sight of Salmonstripe. "No..!"

"Shimmer-" Frostedcloud began quietly.

The clan leader pushed him away and staggered over to the body, breathing quickly. The cats who had been gathered around her quickly parted themselves to each side to let her through.

"Salmonstripe, no..." Shimmerstar sank onto her stomach and pressed her head against her mate's bloody fur, letting out a loud wail of anguish. "No!"

The agony and despair in her wail struck Iceslide's heart like a thorn. *She already lost Lilynose, and now Salmonstripe...* He hung his head and shut his eyes, unable to watch as Shimmerstar cried against Salmonstripe's body. Their son, Creekleap, crouched beside her and pressed against her. *This is my fault...*

Some time passed as the cats recovered from the shock of the attack, and the medicine cats went around treating injuries. Iceslide was aware of cuts on his chest, but felt no pain. He felt nothing but guilt and sorrow.

Shimmerstar slowly raised her head. Her clan was watching her, waiting for her to say something to reassure them. "W-we know more about the enemy more than ever. We-"

"We know more than that!" Troutspots cut in, glaring at Iceslide. "We know that *he* is a traitor!"

Every cat turned to look at Iceslide, some puzzled, while others were furious. "What?" Winterlight jumped to his defense, glaring at Troutspots. "You think he'd help a bloodthirsty group of rogues?"

"Of course he would!" Ravenfeather snarled. "Iceslide has never been loyal!"

"That's not true!" Perchstripe hissed.

Troutspots rose his voice above the rest. "I heard it myself!" He yowled. "So did Creekleap!" He glared at Iceslide. "He helped that stinking rogue get to the forest!"

"That's enough!" Shimmerstar's voice cracked as she tried to yowl. She stared across at Iceslide, her eyes numb with grief. "Iceslide, is this true?"

Every cat turned to him, and he tensed, lowering his head as their eyes burned on him, waiting for him to speak. He wished he could sink into the snow. He wished he could run away. He wished that Bone Shred had killed him. Anything to get out of this terrible nightmare. But he knew there was no escaping from what he'd done.

Iceslide swallowed, feeling small and vulnerable as he spoke. "I met Bone Shred and his rogues in twolegplace," His mew was dry and quiet, each word tearing him apart inside bit by bit. "T-They were starving, so I offered to take them somewhere nearby where they'd have food and-"

"Are you insane?" Mudslip exclaimed, his eyes blazing with shock and fury.

Beside him, Swanpool looked stunned. "You helped murderers!"

Other cats hissed and snarled around him, and he rose his voice. "I didn't know they were bad cats!" He cried desperately, his heart crumbling with guilt. "I thought I was doing a good thing!"

The clearing erupted into roars and snarls of anger. "You idiot!" Creekleap screeched. "You got my father killed!"

"How dare you?" Petalfin hissed, her eyes blazing with anguish. "You've caused all of this!"

"You're a heartless fool!" Dipfoot yowled. Frostedcloud was staring

at Iceslide, his eyes dark.

Iceslide shrank back, hot shame and misery washing over him as his clanmates hurled insults at him. *I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!* He wanted to wail his heart out.

"Silence!" Shimmerstar yowled, and the clan slowly quieted, glaring at Iceslide.

He dared to meet his leader's gaze. For a moment, she looked numb and emotionless. "Iceslide, your little adventures in twolegplace were unacceptable enough before. But this..." Fury slowly dawned in her eyes, and she staggered as she stood up. "This is something else. Do you have any idea what you've done?" Her voice rose into a furious snarl, so loud and sharp that it startled him.

"Shimmerstar-" Iceslide choked out.

"You've caused all of this!" The RiverClan leader shrieked angrily, her eyes filled with pain. "The clans are being terrorized and outnumbered by rogues! Cats have died, Iceslide, so many cats! And every single death, every drop of blood spilled, has been because of your stupidity!"

Her words struck him like scorching fire, shocking and breaking his heart. Iceslide whimpered, feeling a growing lump in his throat. "I'm sorry-"

"Get out of my sight!" Shimmerstar screeched at him, and he stumbled backwards. "I don't want to see you for the rest of the day! Just go!"

Without thinking, Iceslide spun and fled to the warriors den, pushing through the crowd of furious cats. He stumbled and sank into his nest, letting a cry escape his jaws. *I'm a fool... I'm a fool, I've caused so much death, so much pain...*

He'd never felt so numb and heartbroken in his life. The guilt he felt was like having the weight of the world on his shoulders, suffocating him, breaking him. He thought of all the cats he'd gotten killed, from every clan. His own clanmates. His own parents.

He trembled and sobbed in his nest. *If this isn't some horrible nightmare, I want to fall asleep and never wake up. StarClan can have me, if they even want me after all I've done.*

Allegiance Update #7

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Maplesky - Light ginger tom with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Otterpelt

Warriors

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Sunripple - Yellow and gold tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Troutspots - Silver spotted tom with green eyes.

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Risingpaw

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly,

ice blue eyes.

Blizzardfur - Thick furred mottled white and silver tom with pale blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Creekleap - Light golden brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Perchstripe - Light gray tom with black stripes, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dovepaw

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Arcticpaw

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Fintail - White tom with a silver striped tail, green eyes.

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Darkminnow - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintfrost - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Apprentices

Arcticpaw - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovepaw- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingpaw - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Queens

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes. Mother to

Dipfoot's kits:

Thunderkit - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Eelkit - Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes and a sleek tail.

Ruskakit - Tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes.

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Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes. Mother to Creekleap's kits:

Frostkit - Mottled pale brown and white speckled tom with a white face and legs, blue eyes.

Wetkit - Dark gray and white tom with amber eyes.

Tansykit - Light golden brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

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Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes. Expecting Divetail's kits.

Coralshine - Light reddish salmon swirled tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes. Expecting Blizzardfur's kits.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine, amber eyes.

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly,

yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Apprentices

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes. Mother to Stormstar's kits:

Dewkit - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondkit - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Spicepaw

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Snowtuft- Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices:

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Spicepaw - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Willowpaw- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Kits

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes. Nursing Weaselnose and Dreamwhisper's kits:

Starkit - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingkit - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalkit - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryepaw

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryepaw - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Bone Shred's Gang

Leader: Bone Shred - Broad shouldered black tom with three white stripes on each of his sides. Wears a fox skull on his head.

Rogues:

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Crimson Ice - White tom with red paws, chest blaze, muzzle, ears, and stripe down spine, long scar across his eye, amber eyes.

Shredded Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with black paws, dark green eyes.

Dark Hawk - Black tom with green eyes.

Shadow Snarl - Thick furred black tom with amber eyes.

Patch Swipe - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Blinding Sun - Orange and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Glass Face - Silver tom with several cuts on his face, blue eyes.

Oil Tail - Siamese tom with blue eyes.

Heart Burn - Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Howl - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandelion - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Bristle - Spiky furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Glitter - Thin ginger tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Dark Hawk's kits:

Scrappy - Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Sunny - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skipper - Small lighter brown tabby tom with small white patches and light blue-green eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Dime - small silver spotted tabby tom with pale green eyes.

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Truffle - Cream colored tom with yellow eyes. Wears a dark blue collar.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 24

[image]

The light of morning shone through the roof of the den, awakening Iceslide. He parted his eyelids slowly, looking at his surroundings without raising his head. Through the mouth of the den, he could see the clearing blanketed in white, but the snowing had stopped.

The memories of yesterday returned to him, sending his stomach twisting. *Whitedapple is dead... Salmonstripe, Shorestep, Lakesong...* Sorrow and guilt pulled at his heart like a stone sinking to the bottom of the river. He felt unable to resurface. He closed his eyes, reluctant to face the world he had caused so much pain to.

He fell back asleep for a while, then decided that he had to leave the den sooner or later. He rose from his nest and shook his ruffled fur before heading for the exit, drawing in a slow breath. *They'll be at my throat when they see me...*

When he was outside, he looked around the snowy clearing uncertainly. Mudslip and Vixenwhisper were eating by the fresh kill pile. Warmmoss was licking a cut on Fintail's shoulder.

Swanpool was sitting outside the medicine den, looking uneasy. When Maplesky poked his head out, she looked up. "How is Arcticpaw?" She asked worriedly.

"He was hurt badly, but he'll be fine," The medicine cat assured her. "He just needs some rest."

He noticed how exhausted Maplesky looked and guessed that he and Otterpelt had been awake all night treating wounds. *Wounds that I caused...*

He saw Frostedcloud and Shimmerstar speaking quietly across the clearing. When they noticed him, they looked at him through emotionless eyes. After a moment, Shimmerstar's eyes narrowed, and her tail flicked before she and Frostedcloud looked away and

continued their conversation.

I need to save Truffle and Dime... Iceslide looked around for someone who might not bite his head off. He spotted Blizzardfur speaking with Perchstripe and padded over. As he neared, the striped warrior glared at him and turned away, lashing his tail as he crossed the clearing. *Shorestep was his mother.* Iceslide remembered with a rush of guilt. *Of course he's mad at me.*

Blizzardfur flicked his fluffy tail, irritated at Perchstripe's rudeness, then turned to his brother. "Hey, Iceslide."

"Hey." He sat down and found himself unsure of what to say. *Is he mad at me too?*

The mottled white tom shifted closer to him. "You didn't mean it, Iceslide," He meowed quietly.

"I still did it," He meowed quietly. After a moment, he looked at his brother numbly. "I need help."

"With what?" Blizzardfur asked.

Iceslide hesitated, looking around to make sure no other cat was near before he spoke. "Two of my friends are being held prisoner by Bone Shred and his rogues. I can't rescue them alone, I need the clan to help."

"What?" Blizzardfur looked at him like he was mad. "Are you insane? You just caused the deaths of their friends and kin, and you expect them to help you save your kittypet friends, risking more lives?"

He looked down, realizing how crazy he was to think they would. "I know," He rasped. "But what else do I do? I can't let them die."

Blizzardfur's blue eyes softened. "Iceslide, you're lucky Shimmerstar didn't exile you yesterday. If I were you, I'd be careful and start thinking of your clan first."

"I am, but they're my friends!" Iceslide stared at him desperately. "Will *you* help me? Come with me and-"

"No." Blizzardfur replied immediately. "I'm staying here to defend our clan, Coralshine, and our future kits." He studied Iceslide, his expression a mixture of sadness and disbelief. "I suggest you do the same." He turned away toward the nursery.

Iceslide sighed and looked down, digging his claws into the snow as he grew anxious. *What are they doing to Truffle and Dime right now? Are they still alive?*

"Iceslide."

He turned to see Sunripple padding to his side, speaking lowly. "I heard what you said... I'll help you."

He stared at him in surprise. "You will?" He asked hopefully.

"Of course." Sunripple looked around the camp. "Come on, everyone's busy." He turned and headed for a gap between the reeds, and Iceslide quickly followed. When they were on the other side, they began heading through the snow.

Iceslide looked at his friend. "Why are you helping me?" He asked quietly.

"After all you've done for me and Dreamwhisper, it's the least I could do," Sunripple replied.

Dreamwhisper... He glanced at him, his stomach twisting with guilt as he remembered seeing the dead queen, her kits crying by her body. "Don't you blame me for her death, now that you know..."

Sunripple was quiet for a moment, his eyes flooding with sorrow. After a moment, he shook his head. "No. You didn't kill her, they did." He hesitated as they neared the border. "It's part of why I came," He admitted. "I want to avenge her and take out a few of their cats."

"This isn't a suicide mission." Iceslide looked at him sharply, growing uneasy. "We aren't going to fight unless we have to."

"I hope we will," Sunripple muttered. Iceslide glanced at his friend, then looked ahead again as they walked.

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It didn't take long for them to reach the woodland. They paused by the edge of it, and Sunripple turned to him. "So what are we going to do? Ask nicely for them to release the prisoners?"

Iceslide shook his head. "No, I have a plan. We have to be sneaky." He looked through the trees, nervous, but determined. "Follow my lead. Don't act hostile."

The two cats headed through the snowy forest, the air heavy with the scent of the rogues. Now that he knew how they really were, the scent made his stomach turn with anxiety. He swallowed. *It'll be okay. We'll just-*

"Hello there."

He was startled and stepped back as Shredded Ivy stepped out of the snowy bushes, her dark green eyes gleaming. Not far from her, Shadow Snarl padded out to her side, tail lashing slowly.

"Greetings." Iceslide dipped his head, trying to push away his fear and sound friendly. "How are you?"

"What do you want?" Shredded Ivy growled. "You're not welcome here."

Shadow Snarl sneered and unsheathed his claws. "Get out of here before we rip you to shreds!"

"Take it easy," Iceslide urged, thinking quickly. "I'd like to speak to Bone Shred."

Shredded Ivy looked amused. "And you think he wants to speak to you?"

Sunripple looked at Iceslide uneasily as he went on. "I consider him a friend, and I'd like to help him take over the forest."

The rogue she-cat's eyes flickered with surprise, and she exchanged a look with Shadow Snarl. "And who's he?" She nodded to Sunripple coldly.

Iceslide was about to respond when Sunripple spoke up. "My name is Sunripple. Iceslide told me about you, and I wanted to join you."

"Hmm..." Shredded Ivy narrowed her eyes. A growl rumbled in Shadow Snarl's throat.

With a purr, Iceslide stepped closer to her and touched his nose to her ear. "I thought we were friends," He murmured. "Aren't we?" *Two can play her game.*

She leaned back from him, tail lashing as she studied him uncertainly.

Sunripple yawned and arched his back in a stretch. "Let's go, Iceslide. If Bone Shred doesn't want two more cats-"

"Fine!" Shredded Ivy snapped and turned away sharply. "Follow me." They padded after her, and Shadow Snarl took up the rear of the group. *Good.* Iceslide thought in relief. *The first part is over. Now we just need to get Bone Shred to believe us.*

When they reached the camp, Iceslide scanned the clearing. There were cats everywhere, and he recognized most of them. *Crimson Ice, Dark Hawk, Oil Tail...* He had to swallow back his anger. These cats are heartless killers, liars...

When they saw the clan cats, many began growling and snarling at them.

"Fleabags!" Crimson Ice yowled.

"Dumb clan cats!" Oil Tail's blue eyes gleamed with menace. "Did you enjoy the surprises we left you?"

Sunripple began to growl, and Iceslide nudged him, whispering. "Keep it under control." If something went wrong, they would die. There were two of them and over a clan-full of the rogues.

They neared Bone Shred's log den, and Shredded Ivy raised her voice. "Bone Shred, you have visitors." She and Shadow Snarl sat on either side of the clan cats.

Iceslide watched as Bone Shred slowly stepped out from the shadows, a low growl rumbling in his throat. "Iceslide, is it?" He leaped onto his log, his tail flicking in amusement. "You're an even bigger fool than I thought, showing your face here."

The rogues padded closer to them, circling them and watching through narrowed eyes. Iceslide tried to ignore them as he looked up at the rogue leader and spoke. "I've been thinking about what you said in the battle yesterday," He meowed. "I realize now that I was wrong. I'm proud of the part I've played in your plan."

The guilt he felt about it made the words torturous to get out. But he forced himself to continue with the lie. "I'd like to continue working for you. You could use someone on the inside, couldn't you?"

Bone Shred silently studied him, and Iceslide looked into the dark eye sockets of his skull. "And who is that?" He moved his gaze to Sunripple.

"A clanmate of mine," Iceslide replied. "I convinced him to come with me."

Sunripple dipped his head. "You're very powerful cats, unlike the clans. I'd be honored to serve you."

We're doing great. Iceslide thought in satisfaction.

But Bone Shred remained silent, and he grew wary. Eventually, he spoke. "Very well," He meowed smoothly. "Our friendship can continue, Iceslide. That is, if you do me a favor."

What favor? Iceslide wondered uneasily. "Yes?"

The dark tom rested his eye-less gaze on Sunripple. "Kill him."

What? Iceslide froze, and cats around them erupted into yowls and snickers of excitement. Sunripple's eyes were wide, and he shot Iceslide a questioning look. Iceslide looked back at him anxiously.

"B-but he wants to join us!" Iceslide stammered. "We-"

"And I want you to prove your loyalty." Bone Shred studied him. "Kill him, now."

"Kill him! Kill him!"

Iceslide looked around anxiously as the cats began to chant, their eyes dark and gleaming with excitement and rage. *Oh, StarClan help me!* He looked beside him at Sunripple, who returned his gaze uneasily. *I can't do this! I won't!*

"Kill him!" Bone Shred snapped.

Iceslide looked up at him desperately. "There's no reason to kill him! I-"

"Shredded Ivy, do it." The rogue leader ordered, lashing his tail.

"No!" Iceslide spun just as Shadow Snarl lunged at Sunripple and thrust him to the ground, planting one paw on his head and pushing it back to expose his throat. Before Sunripple could try to fight back, Shredded Ivy slashed her claws across his throat.

Sunripple choked out a cry as blood ran from his throat, and the two rogues stepped away from him, looking down in satisfaction as he went limp.

"No!" Iceslide started toward his clanmate, but Crimson Ice grabbed him and pinned him down, planting a paw on the back of his neck. He struggled, but he was no match for the huge cat. He looked up anxiously.

Bone Shred was shaking his head. "Nice try, Iceslide. It's a shame too. I would have liked to continue working with you."

"How dare you!" Iceslide cried. *Sunripple is dead because of me!* Anger pulsed through him, and he struggled under Crimson Ice. "You have my friends from twolegplace! Let them go!"

Bone Shred studied him. "Why didn't you just say so?" He leaped down from the log, flicking his tail at Crimson Ice. "Let him go." The rogue did, and Iceslide staggered to his paws, glaring at the black tom "Follow me."

He hesitated, looking over his shoulder. Sunripple lay dead, blood oozing from his throat. Shredded Ivy was licking blood from her paw. *I'm sorry, Sunripple...* Iceslide shuddered and slowly followed Bone Shred across the clearing.

This is crazy... He'll never let them go. He's playing at something. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Crimson Ice and Poisoned Sap following them. This isn't good. Something's very wrong.

Bone Shred led them to a rocky den, nodding to the guards, and they moved aside, watching as their leader padded in. Iceslide followed him in, aware of the other two rogues behind him.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw his friends. Truffle was laying on his side, looking exhausted and weak. He was very thin, and Iceslide realized with a pang of sadness that they were starving. Dime was curled up in the corner of the den, his eyes round with fear. "Truffle! Dime!" He gasped.

Truffle's eyes flickered open, and he rolled onto his stomach, staring at him in disbelief. "Iceslide?" He croaked, and Dime's ears pricked up with hope. "Help us!"

He started toward them, but Bone Shred raised his tail and growled. the other two rogues moved past them, and Poisoned Sap pinned Truffle, digging her claws into his shoulders. Crimson Ice grabbed Dime by his scruff and pulled him away from the corner, and the small tom wailed as he was pushed onto his stomach.

"What are you doing?" Iceslide snapped shakily, glaring at Bone Shred. "Let them go!"

"I will." Bone Shred purred smoothly. "Once you give me more information about the clans."

Iceslide bristled. "Never!"

"Tell me something I can use for my next attack," Bone Shred meowed.

No! Iceslide glared at him and snarled. "I've told you more than enough!"

Bone Shred looked at Crimson Ice and nodded, and the rogue lunged down and sank his teeth into Dime's neck. The spotted tom cried out, and a Crimson Ice released him, he went still, blood pooling down his neck.

"No!" Iceslide shrieked and started toward him, but Bone Shred pushed him down and pressed a powerful paw to his back. *No, no!* His heart throbbed with grief.

"Tell me, or the kittypet dies too," Bone Shred growled down at him.

Crimson Ice pushed Dime's body away roughly while Truffle whimpered, staring at Iceslide desperately. "Don't let me die!" He kittypet wailed. "Iceslide, please!"

I won't! Iceslide pulled away from Bone Shred's paw and faced him. "The clans meet at fourtrees on the full moon!" He blurted out, knowing he was doing something terrible, but desperate to save his friend. "They won't be expecting an attack!"

Bone Shred looked back at him, a slow purr rumbling in his throat. "I see. That sounds perfect." He looked at Poisoned Sap, and Iceslide waited for him to tell her to let him go, relieved. *Thank-*

"Kill him."

Iceslide froze as Poisoned Sap pulled Truffle's collar back with her claws and bit into his neck. The kittypet squealed and struggled, but she crunched down harder, and a moment later the kittypet's head fell to the ground, his eyes wide and sightless.

"No!" Iceslide screeched and lunged at Poisoned Sap. The golden she-cat slashed him across the shoulder and pinned him down. "You piece of fox dung!" He wailed his heart out like a kit as he struggled. "I'll kill you! You piece of rotten prey!"

Poisoned Sap sneered down at him. "Shall I kill him too, Bone Shred?" She dug her claws into his shoulders.

Bone Shred looked down at Iceslide. "Keep him prisoner. He may still be useful to us." He looked at Poisoned Sap and Crimson Ice.

"It's time."

"We're attacking the RiverClan camp again," Poisoned Sap purred down at him, her amber eyes gleaming. "Our work is far from over."

"No!" Iceslide screeched, his heart jolting with alarm as he pushed up against her, struggling to free himself. "Let go!"

Bone Shred looked down at him and purred. "Thanks for your help, Iceslide." He turned away, and Poisoned Sap and Crimson Ice followed.

No! They can't! Iceslide immediately staggered to his paws and started after them, but Dark Hawk and Shadow Snarl leaped in his way.

"You're not going anywhere," Dark Hawk sneered.

Iceslide snarled and lunged for the tom, but the two easily overpowered him. Eventually he gave up and slumped to the ground between the bodies of Truffle and Dime, sobbing and trembling. *I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!*

He'd never felt so defeated. Everything about this had failed. Sunripple was dead. Truffle was dead. Dime was dead. And now Bone Shred was attacking RiverClan again, and no doubt a gathering.

I'm sorry! He wanted to wail to the sky. *I'm sorry!*

Chapter 25

[image]

Iceslide lay in the stone den on his stomach, listening as Bone Shred led his rogues away. He felt numb and empty inside. He tried not to look at the bodies of Truffle and Dime that were here with him. He wanted to remember them as they were when they were alive, not bloody and motionless.

I never should have come here... He thought. *Now three more cats have died because of me. My friends.* He rested his chin on the cold ground and covered his face with his paws. *Now what? I guess I wait here until Bone Shred has me killed. In the meantime, he's killing more of my clanmates.* The thought tore his heart in two.

He glanced up at the mouth of the den where the guards were. Heart Burn and Patch Swipe were sitting there with their backs to him. *I can't fight off both of them.* He felt completely helpless. Just then, he heard meowing outside the den.

"You two would be much more useful in the battle. Why don't you go catch up with the others?"

Patch Swipe hesitated. "We were ordered to guard Iceslide," He growled.

"We can do that." Another cat meowed. There was some hesitation before Patch Swipe and Heart Burn hurried away, and two new cats took their place. Iceslide recognized them as Howl and Dandelion. He had met them before at their old home in twolegplace.

Iceslide closed his eyes, and it was quiet for a few moments. Then suddenly, the two cats turned and entered the den, and he raised his head, narrowing his eyes. "What do you want?" He growled. Perhaps they'd finish him.

"Get up!" Howl hissed urgently. "We'll get you out of here."

"What?" Iceslide blinked as Dandelion crouched and sniffed him.

"Are you hurt?" She asked worriedly.

He got to his paws, wondering what was going on. "I-I'm fine."

"Good." Howl was crouched by the entrance, staring into the clearing before looking back at him urgently. "The coast is clear. Come on!" He crept out from the den.

They're really helping me! Iceslide hesitated, then padded out after him, aware of Dandelion following. To his surprise, the camp was empty. *Bone Shred must have taken all of his cats but the guards! And he says I'm a fool!*

Howl nodded across the clearing. "You'd better hurry if you want to help your kin."

He looked at the dark gray tom, puzzled. "Why are you helping me?"

"You saved us from starvation," Howl replied. "Bone Shred is wrong to do this to you, after you brought us here."

Dandelion stood beside her mate, her eyes narrowing. "He's a cruel, heartless cat!" She spat. "We have all we need here, and yet he still wants more. He wants others to suffer."

"If you think that, why do you follow him?" Iceslide asked in confusion. "You could leave."

The rogues exchanged a solemn, helpless look. Then Howl spoke. "Bone Shred was the toughest cat in twolegplace," He meowed. "Many of us were living alone on the streets, starving and unable to care for ourselves. Bone Shred gathered us, promising us shelter, protection, and food in exchange for absolute loyalty. And he did give us everything we wanted, but many of us weren't prepared for the price we had to pay."

"He encouraged violence, enjoyed picking fights with other cats," Dandelion meowed sadly. "Some cats were already like him, but it didn't take long for most others to adapt. Eventually nearly all of

them shared his thirst for blood."

Howl looked down. "It won't be long until you and your friends are all dead, Iceslide." He said quietly. "I'm sorry, but it's a fact. Bone Shred won't back down, and his cats will follow him anywhere."

"No..." Iceslide dug his claws into the snowy ground. "I have to go." He had to get to the camp as soon as possible. Cats were dying. He started forward, then hesitated, looking over his shoulder. "Come with me to RiverClan," He urged. "You can be safe there. You can be warriors."

Dandelion's eyes flickered with longing, and Howl looked down. "We can't," He murmured. "We wouldn't be able to hunt on our own. That's why we rely on Bone Shred." He paused. "And we need to stay with Bristle, our son. Unfortunately he's just like the others now, but he's still our son, and we stay where he is."

Iceslide hesitated, feeling a rush of sympathy for them. They deserve better. They're good cats living among terrible ones. "Thank you." He gave them a nod before hurrying out of the camp.

His legs were tired and stiff, and he still felt numb and shaken by the deaths of Truffle, Dime, and Sunripple. But fear for his clanmates gave him energy, and he quickly increased his speed as he raced through the snowy forest. *I have to get to them!*

The sun was setting as he ran across RiverClan territory, panting and kicking up snow behind him. His chest felt heavy and desperate for a break to breathe, but he refused the urge. He was terrified of what awaited him at the camp. He knew that there would be more dead. He prayed to StarClan that Winterlight and Blizzardfur wouldn't be among them.

As he neared the camp, he heard Bone Shred yowl. "Retreat!", and his heart skipped with alarm. Rogues began streaming out of the camp, and Iceslide quickly crouched behind a snowbank, relieved that his white fur would help keep him hidden.

The last cat to leave was Bone Shred. The massive tom paused and looked over his shoulder at the camp. Iceslide tensed. His skull was

splashed with blood. After a moment, he gave a satisfied nod and followed his rogues into the distance.

Whose blood is that? Iceslide wondered with a shiver. He waited a few more moments to make sure all the rogues had gone, then stepped out from his hiding place and ran across the stepping stones.

When he broke through the reeds, he let out a cry. *Oh no...!*

It was like yesterday all over again, only worse. Cats were scattered throughout the clearing, the snow stained with fresh blood. *No...*

Petalfin was curled up against Frozenripple, pressing her muzzle into his fur and sobbing. His former mentor was dead, blood streaming through his long fur. Not far from them lay their son, Fintail, bearing horrible wounds in his throat and shoulder. Darkminnow was sitting beside the body of his brother, his eyes dull with grief.

"Oh, Frozenripple," Petalfin rested her head against her mate's shoulder, trembling. "What will I do without you?"

Outside the medicine den, Maplesky was slumped in the snow with his stomach slashed. Otterpelt had a paw rested on her dead mentor's shoulder as she stared down at him, murmuring something. *Our medicine cat is dead...*

"Creekleap..." Shimmerstar croaked and slumped down beside her son, pressing her muzzle against his fur. "No... Not you too..."

"Creekleap!" Heartsong cried and ran from the nursery, ignoring Cherryberry as she called for her to wait. She crouched beside Shimmerstar and licked Creekleap's bloody shoulder, letting out a wail of grief.

At the entrance of the nursery, Cherryberry was trying to block the kits view from the clearing, moving back and forth as the kits struggled to get through.

"What's going on?" Frostkit squeaked. "Is Creekleap hurt?"

"Why can't we see him?" Tansykit asked anxiously, trying to peer over Cherryberry at her father. "I want to see him!"

Cherryberry didn't seem to know what to say. "You must stay here for now," Her voice cracked with sadness. "You-"

Tansykit slipped between the queen's legs and ran across the clearing, and as Cherryberry spun to try to catch her, Frostkit and Wetkit ran out after their sister. "Wait!" The queen gasped.

Shimmerstar stepped back as the kits neared, staring at their father with wide wary eyes. They kept a distance as though afraid to get any closer.

"What's wrong with him?" Wetkit whispered and looked up at Heartsong. "Why won't he get up?"

"Otterpelt, Creekleap is hurt badly!" Tansykit cried. The medicine cat looked over at them numbly, then dropped her gaze. "Why won't she come?"

Frostkit took a wary step toward Creekleap and prodded him with a tiny paw, his eyes round.

Heartsong looked away, and Shimmerstar rested her tail over her back, speaking quietly. "Kits, your father hunts with StarClan now."

"StarClan?" Frostkit stared up at the clan leader with wide eyes. "That... That means..." He broke into a wail and pressed his head against Creekleap's flank, and the other kits rushed over.

Iceslide felt his heart shatter like thin ice as he watched the kits cry and huddle against their father's body. *Oh, StarClan, no... I'm so sorry I took your father away. I'm so sorry...*

Wetkit sniffled and looked up with tear filled eyes. "Can we visit him?" He whimpered.

"No, Wetkit..." Heartsong lowered her head and licked his ear. "We can't... He's gone. But he'll always watch over you from StarClan."

The kits continued to cry, and the queen swallowed hard before

reaching toward them with a paw. "Let's go to the nursery. You must say goodbye to Creekleap now."

Wetkit gave his father a last nuzzle before he slowly turned away and pressed his face into Heartsong's fur. Frostkit whispered a "goodbye" before joining his brother.

Tansykit was more reluctant. She stepped closer to Creekleap's face and whimpered as she rubbed her little head against his cheek and licked his nose. "I love you," She whimpered and cried as she turned away, her little tail drooping.

"Iceslide!" Winterlight raced over to him, pressing her head against his neck, and he staggered, dazed. "Thank StarClan you're okay!" She leaned back and stared at him anxiously. "Where were you?"

He was about to respond when he caught sight of Blizzardfur crouched by the nursery with his back to him, his white fur coated with splashes of blood. He immediately hurried over to his brother. "Are you-" He broke off, his heart leaping into his throat.

Coralshine lay in front of him, her chest and neck slick with blood. Her blue eyes were glazed and sightless. He found his gaze drifting to her stomach. A stomach round with kits that would never be born. *No...*

"Blizzardfur..." He rasped. "I'm so sorry..."

The mottled white tom didn't move. "Why... This isn't right," He whispered, trembling. "We were having kits! We..." He trailed off and suddenly spun to face Iceslide, his eyes lighting with a mixture of anguish and fury. "This is your fault!" He spat.

Iceslide started backwards. "I-" He began desperately.

"You did this!" His brother screeched at him. "You brought those rogues here!" His eyes glistened as he yowled. "She was pregnant, Iceslide! You've killed Coralshine *and* our kits!"

"Blizzardfur!" Winterlight raced over, looking at her brothers warily. "Listen-"

"You've killed her!" Blizzardfur ignored her and raged on, his blue eyes locked on Iceslide. "You've killed your clanmates, you've killed the clans, you mouse-brained fool!" He lunged forward and raked his claws across his face.

Iceslide reared back in shock, his face stinging from the blow. He shakily opened his eyes, feeling his muzzle and cheek wet with blood. Winterlight and Dipfoot were grasping Blizzardfur as he yowled at him furiously and tried to pull free. Eventually he gave up and let the two cats guide him away as he cried.

What have I done? Iceslide stepped back, trembling as blood trickled down his face. *I ruined his life... I ruined my brother's future. I ruined RiverClan's future. Maybe even the future of the whole forest.*

Chapter 26

[image]

Snow drifted slowly and silently to the ground. It was quiet. So quiet. Iceslide lay in the snow near the side of the clearing, looking ahead dully.

Several days had passed since the last attack. The clan was constantly on guard now. The warriors were practicing battle moves and discussing tactics and ways to avoid trouble with the rogues, while apprentices and queens were very jumpy at the slightest noise, terrified of being attacked again.

Shimmerstar had lost another life in the battle, and cats were very worried that she was on her last life. She'd spent the last few days in her den, refusing to see anyone.

"She must be afraid of losing her last life," Ravenfeather had commented scornfully. "Why else would she hide away at a time like this?"

Vixenwhisper had jumped to her defense. "She's lost her mate and both her kits, in case you forgot! She's grieving."

The black tom had growled. "Her clan should be put first."

"And what if she is on her last life? What if she dies?" Heronleg had asked anxiously. "Frostedcloud would never make it to the moonstone without being attacked by the rogues. Then we'd be leaderless!"

Otterpelt had begun taking on the responsibilities of being sole medicine cat of her clan. She seemed lost and deep in grief for Maplesky. But she was carrying out her regular duties and checking on every cat as often as possible. She seemed to avoid Iceslide at all costs. He knew that she had foreseen what would happen. She knew everything was his fault.

"Hey."

Iceslide glanced over and saw Winterlight settle beside him. "Hey," He murmured.

It was quiet for a moment. "It's terrible, isn't it?" She murmured sadly. "It's a mess."

"It is. And it's my fault." Iceslide meowed quietly.

Blizzardfur was padding across the clearing with Troutspots. When he spotted Iceslide, he narrowed his eyes and lashed his fluffy tail before looking away and continuing onward. Troutspots bared his teeth at Iceslide before following.

They hate me. Iceslide thought. *And they have every right to.* The whole clan had grieved deeply for Coralshine. Heartsong had told the clan how she and Creekleap had fought bravely to defend the nursery. They'd given their lives for the queens and kits. Blizzardfur argued that Coralshine should have been in the nursery with the other queens, but every cat knew that she would have rather fought to protect the kits.

There was some good news in the days since the battle. Arcticblaze, Dovewhisper, and Risingmoon had become warriors, and Dipfoot and Shallowpool's kits had begun their training.

Winterlight had become mentor to Ruskapaw, and she seemed very proud and excited. This was the life she wanted, not with kits of her own, but to train others and fight for her clan.

Just last night, Cherryberry had given birth to her kits. She'd named them Lemonkit and Rainkit, and though she missed Divetail and wished he could be there, she saw him in their kits and it comforted her. Heartsong was very supportive and kept her company often.

The news of Sunripple's death had shocked the clan. Iceslide had decided to lie, saying that they'd been hunting together when they'd been ambushed. It would have been much worse if they knew the truth.

Winterlight watched Blizzardfur walk away, then turned to Iceslide.

"He'll recover," She meowed quietly. "He just needs time."

"Time doesn't change the fact that Coralshine is dead," He pointed out. "He's right to blame me for it."

She shook her head. "Any cat who blames you is mouse brained. You didn't kill anyone, they did."

It was silent for a while before Iceslide spoke. "Thanks, Winterlight. You're the only cat who doesn't hate me."

"You're my brother." She licked his ear reassuringly. "How could I ever hate you?"

Iceslide sighed and rested his chin on his paws. His sister rested her head on his shoulder, and he closed his eyes. *I should be the one dead. Not anyone else.*

***

He found himself standing on the frozen river again. He looked around slowly. It was silent, and there wasn't another cat in sight. The ground was blanketed with snow, and the air was so cold it chilled him to the bone.

"Hello?" He called warily, shuddering. He couldn't help but feel like he was being watched.

Suddenly, he became aware of something wet under his paws and blinked, looking down. He let out a cry of horror. A thick pool of blood was spreading under him, oozing across the ice. As his heart raced, he looked up and gasped.

He was surrounded by the bodies of dead cats, laying on the ice, their fur streaked with blood. His eyes darted around at them. *Creekleap... Grayshadow... Whitedapple... Maplesky... Lilynose... Frozenripple...* He grew dizzy as he took in the bloody corpses, staggering backwards.

His paws slipped and he shrieked as he fell forward, his chin and chest slamming into the layer of blood. "Gah!" He cried and staggered frantically to his paws, hot blood dragging at his fur.

"What have you done? What have you done?"

"You fool!"

"Murderer!"

The ghostly whispers echoed around him and he backed away in terror, only to step on Salmonstripe's body. He spun and leaped backwards. "I'm sorry!"

"You've destroyed everything!"

"You've doomed the forest!"

"Everything you love is gone!"

The whispers rose into furious wails and screeches that whistled like heavy wind around him. Iceslide wailed and cowered to the bloody ice, the stench of blood filling his nose. "I'm sorry!" He cried. "I'm sorry! I-"

***

"Iceslide!"

He gasped and jerked awake in his nest, breathing hard. Frostedcloud was standing over him, looking startled. "What's wrong with you?" The deputy exclaimed.

"I-I- nothing." Iceslide's fur slowly flattened, the nightmare still fresh in his mind. His bones tingled with fear. "I-I was having a nightmare."

Frostedcloud's eyes narrowed. "Worse than the one we're in?" He paused, then spoke. "I want you to go on the dawn patrol. The others are waiting for you."

He nodded and watched as the deputy turned and padded out of the den. *It was just a nightmare... It wasn't-* He broke off his thoughts, and his heart sunk as he faced a terrible truth. *It was real. Everything about it was real. Those cats died, and their blood is on my paws.* He let out a slow sigh and shakily stood, giving his shoulder a few licks

before he slipped out of the den.

He didn't look up as he padded across the clearing toward the others. He raised his head when he reached them and felt his stomach churn. Blizzardfur was there, along with Perchstripe and Warmmoss. Troutspots was there with his apprentice, Eelpaw.

The second Blizzardfur caught sight of him, his fur bristled. "What's he doing here?" He glared over at Frostedcloud. "I don't want to be anywhere near him."

"You will patrol with whoever I say," Frostedcloud growled. "That's final."

Iceslide glanced at his brother apologetically, his heart aching. *I'm sorry. I'd stay away if I could.* Blizzardfur glared at him coldly, then looked away. He noticed that Warmmoss and Troutspots were also giving him looks of disapproval. But they said nothing.

"Let's go," Troutspots meowed and headed for the stepping stones, and the others followed him out of camp.

***

The sky was bright now. They were about halfway done remarking the SkyClan border now. Iceslide felt very awkward and uneasy. Only Perchstripe acknowledged him now and then. Warmmoss and Blizzardfur kept ahead of the patrol, purposely avoiding him. Troutspots was busy speaking to Eelpaw, testing his apprentice and showing him the border.

"Do you think the border is fresh enough?" Troutspots prompted, flicking his tail.

Eelpaw hesitated and sniffed the air. "Yes?"

Troutspots shook his head. "Not quite. A few patches of grass are still faint."

They continued onward, and Iceslide tailed the group, his head low. He felt like there was no way out of this depression and pain. There was no way to fix everything he'd destroyed. He glanced up at

Blizzardfur. *My own brother hates me.*

Warmmoss suddenly raised her head sharply. "Troutspots." She meowed lowly.

Beside her, Blizzardfur looked at her questioningly, and Troutspots turned away from his apprentice to respond. "What is it?"

"I smell-"

A golden brown blur shot out of the bushes and lunged for Troutspot's neck, thrusting him into the snow. The tom yowled out in shock as Poisoned Sap sank her teeth into his neck. As she raised her head from the dead cat and snarled, her lips dripping with blood, several more rogues leaped out at them from behind her.

"No!" Iceslide screeched and crouched to leap at her, but weight cannoned into his side, rolling him into the snow. Claws dug into his shoulders, and he looked up to see Oil Tail sneering down at him, piercing blue eyes gleaming as he raised a paw and slashed at his face.

He huffed and kicked Oil Tail hard in the stomach, sending him reeling backwards into the snow. He scrambled to his paws and saw Warmmoss and Eelpaw fighting Dark Hawk and Heart Burn, while Blizzardfur grappled with Glass Face.

"Fox-hearted fleabags!" Warmmoss shrieked as she thrust Heart Burn to the ground and slashed at her ear. Beside her, Eelpaw gasped as he was pinned by Dark Hawk. The black tom lunged for the apprentice's neck.

No! Iceslide leaped on Dark Hawk and bit into his shoulder, snarling, but the rogue easily threw him off, and he landed on his back in the hard snow, gasping at the impact. He staggered to his paws, dazed.

Blizzardfur was slashing at Glass Face, knocking him to the ground. Suddenly his eyes flashed to Iceslide, and he gasped. "Iceslide!" He yowled.

What? He started to look over his shoulder, but Blizzardfur shot

forward and thrust him into the snow. Suddenly the weight vanished, and he heard his brother yowl in pain. He got up to see Poisoned Sap snarling and biting at Blizzardfur's neck.

"No!" He started toward his brother, but Glass Face and Dark Hawk attacked him, and pain seared through him as they slashed and clawed at him. Iceslide struggled, but grew weaker and weaker, and the world began to fade.

***

"Iceslide? Iceslide, please wake up!"

What..? He slowly opened his eyes, feeling cold and numb. He moaned in pain and looked up slowly. Warmmoss was standing over him, her pale eyes lit with desperation. Her fur was clotted with blood.

"Thank StarClan, you're alive!" She sighed in relief. "I thought I was the only one..."

Iceslide slowly pushed himself out of the snow, wincing as pain shot through his hind leg, and he almost collapsed again. But he regained his balance and looked at her. "What happened...?" He croaked. His whole body ached. He felt wet, but couldn't tell if it was snow or blood.

The brown and white she-cat dropped her gaze, and he slowly looked around, inhaling sharply. *Troutspots... Eelpaw... And...* His heart skipped a beat when he saw his brother laying motionless in the snow. *Blizzardfur...*

He gave his life to save me from Poisoned Sap... Even though he blamed me for Coralshine's death, he was willing to... He staggered, and Warmmoss limped to his side, letting him lean on her.

"Let's get back to camp," She rasped. "We have to tell the clan."

Allegiance Update #8

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Warriors

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.

Vixenwhisper - Light golden brown she-cat with white speckles near her rear, yellow eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Shallowpool - Dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Iceslide - Sleek, thin white tom with a very pale silver underbelly, ice blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Ruskapaw

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Heronleg - Gray tom with darker legs and ears, amber eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Apprentice, Thunderpaw

Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes.

Darkminnow - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.

Mintfrost - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Arcticblaze - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovewhisper- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingmoon - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Apprentices

Thunderpaw - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Ruskapaw - Tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes.

Queens

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes. Mother to Creekleap's kits:

Frostkit - Mottled pale brown and white speckled tom with a white face and legs, blue eyes.

Wetkit - Dark gray and white tom with amber eyes.

Tansykit - Light golden brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

-

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes. Mother to Divetail's kits:

Lemonkit - White tom with yellow patches and yellow eyes.

Rainkit - Silver she-cat with darker splashes, light blue eyes.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Pinetail - Dark gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Warriors

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Liontuft - Golden brown and brown tom with yellow eyes.

Redblaze - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with dark ginger markings, yellow eyes.

Baconstripe - dark orange tom with a pale stripe down his spine,

amber eyes.

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Mossbranch - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Diamondpaw

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Apprentices

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Dewpaw - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondpaw - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

Queens

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. Expecting Depthwater's kits.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine cat: Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes.

Apprentice, Spicepaw

Warriors:

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Snowtuft- Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices:

Breezepaw - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Spicepaw - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Hivepelt - Golden spotted tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Silverberry

Warriors:

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Willowpaw

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Driftpaw

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Weaselnose - Ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Jaggedpaw - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Willowpaw- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Driftpaw- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Kits

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes. Nursing Weaselnose and Dreamwhisper's kits:

Starkit - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingkit - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalkit - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Whitestar - White she-cat with yellow eyes.

Deputy: Raventuft - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Medicine cat: Junglefoot - Black and brown tabby tom with deep green eyes.

Apprentice, Ryeheart

Warriors

Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Bone Shred's Gang

Leader: Bone Shred - Broad shouldered black tom with three white stripes on each of his sides. Wears a fox skull on his head.

Rogues:

Poisoned Sap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Crimson Ice - White tom with red paws, chest blaze, muzzle, ears, and stripe down spine, long scar across his eye, amber eyes.

Shredded Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with black paws, dark green eyes.

Dark Hawk - Black tom with green eyes.

Shadow Snarl - Thick furred black tom with amber eyes.

Patch Swipe - Black and white tom with yellow eyes.

Blinding Sun - Orange and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Glass Face - Silver tom with several cuts on his face, blue eyes.

Oil Tail - Siamese tom with blue eyes.

Heart Burn - Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Howl - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandelion - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Bristle - Spiky furred brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Glitter - Thin ginger tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Dark Hawk's kits:

Scrappy - Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Sunny - Pale ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Skipper - Small lighter brown tabby tom with small white patches and light blue-green eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.

Chapter 27

[image]

Three days had passed since the attack. It had been devastating news, but nothing the clan wasn't used to these days. Death was expected every day, it was only a question of how much and who the next victims would be.

It didn't matter when they patrolled or how well guarded the camp was. The rogues always found a way to launch a successful attack. The whole clan was in disarray.

Otterpelt didn't seem to sleep at night. If Iceslide had to go to the dirtplace during the night, he often saw her sitting outside her den, looking up at the stars and whispering, begging StarClan to show her what to do.

It was snowing lightly now. Most cats were in their dens. Iceslide was laying at the side of the clearing with his chin on his paws. Winterlight was settled beside him, her fluffy tail wrapped around him. The clearing was nearly empty. The only other cats were Shimmerstar and Frostedcloud, who were on the far side of the clearing by the tree stump, and Dovewhisper, who was speaking quietly to Darkminnow.

"I keep thinking he's going to appear somewhere," Iceslide meowed quietly as he stared across the clearing at nothing. "But... He won't."

Winterlight looked at him sadly. "He's with Coralshine now," She murmured. "I'm sure he's happy."

"He's dead." He felt his heart sink as he spoke the words. *Because of me... Poisoned Sap was going to kill me. I had my back to her, but Blizzardfur pushed me out of the way.* It was quiet for a while. "Why did he do it?" He said quietly at last.

He felt his sister press her shoulder against his. "You're his brother," She meowed softly. "He loved you. Of course he would have been

willing to give his life for you. I would have done the same for either of you."

It should have been me instead. Iceslide thought numbly. *I deserve to die.*

"Send out a hunting patrol!" Shimmerstar's raspy snarl caught his attention, and he looked up. The clan leader was facing Frostedcloud, her tail bristling. "It's leaf-bare, and we have even less prey than we normally would!"

Frostedcloud looked down. "Shimmerstar, a lot of cats are afraid to go, especially the younger warriors and apprentices. They're afraid of being attacked."

The silver dappled she-cat flattened her ears. "You think I don't know that?" She tried to hiss, but her voice rose into a cry. "Our own territory is dangerous these days. But Heartsong and Cherryberry's kits have to eat. We all do."

"No cat will be eating if the cats we send die!" Frostedcloud retorted sharply. "Is that what you want?"

Iceslide watched, startled by their agitation. *I've never seen them argue like that. Even they don't know what to do. We've started having to plan everything we do around the threat of the rogues, and it's effecting everyone.*

For a heartbeat, Shimmerstar's fur bristled angrily. Then she calmed, her eyes flooding with despair. "I'm sorry, Frostedcloud. I just..." She looked confused and helpless.

Frostedcloud rested his paw gently on her shoulder, lowering his head. "It's a difficult time for our clan," He meowed quietly. "We've suffered a great deal this season. No cat knows what to do."

Beside Iceslide, Winterlight watched them sadly. "It's hard to see Shimmerstar like this," She meowed quietly. "She used to be such a strong and determined leader. She'd never give up. But now..."

Iceslide nodded, looking down. A few moments later, he heard paws padding through the snow and raised his gaze to see Otterpelt

standing over them.

"Are you two alright?" She asked quietly, giving Iceslide's shoulder a sniff. "Your wounds seem better. Any pain?"

He shook his head. He'd had some bad cuts and scratches from the attack days earlier. Otterpelt had patched him up and told him it wasn't serious and he'd be fine.

"Otterpelt, isn't there anything you can do for Shimmerstar?" Winterlight asked hopefully. "She's not herself."

The medicine cat hesitated and looked across the clearing. Shimmerstar had lowered her head and turned to her den, slowly padding inside. Frostedcloud watched her for a moment, then turned away.

"She lost Salmonstripe, Lilynose, and Creekleap all in a short amount of time," Otterpelt murmured. "And she feels helpless against Bone Shred. She bears wounds that we cannot see. No medicine cat can heal those."

It was quiet as she turned and headed toward her den. Iceslide noticed Frostedcloud padding to the center of the clearing, looking hesitant. Then he looked toward the warriors den and raised his voice. "Would any cat like to join a hunting patrol? We need as many cats as possible. I'll lead it myself."

After a moment, Dipfoot and Petalfin stepped out of the den hesitantly. Ravenfeather followed more confidently. But most cats hung back in fear.

Iceslide immediately stood up. "I'll go." He meowed.

***

Thankfully, the patrol hadn't been attacked. They'd tried to stick close to the camp, and it proved to be a good decision. Finding prey was a bit more difficult, but they'd returned with several mice and voles. It wasn't enough for the whole clan, and many cats were going to go to sleep hungry. Most cats insisted on letting the queens and kits have their share.

Iceslide was about to drop a mouse on the little fresh kill pile when he hesitated, looking toward Shimmerstar's den. *I bet she's refusing to eat.* He began heading across the clearing.

He stopped outside the den and hesitated, peering in. She was sitting with her back turned, pawing gently at her nest, which was big enough for two cats. *Salmonstripe used to sleep there.* He thought sadly. *She doesn't want to change the nest.* He hesitated, wondering if he should disturb her.

He was about to back away when she seemed to sense him and looked over her shoulder. "Yes, Iceslide?" She prompted, her voice dull.

He awkwardly padded into the den and dipped his head, resting his mouse on the floor. "Err sorry, did I disturb you?"

Shimmerstar turned slowly to face him. "No. What is it?"

Iceslide was hurt by the dull look of grief in her eyes. They had once blazed with confidence. He could almost feel her sorrow. It filled the den, thick as mist. It triggered the guilt in his heart, but he tried to ignore it and nudged the mouse toward her. "This is for you."

"No." She said immediately. "Give it to the queens."

"They've already eaten," He told her. "You haven't."

She narrowed her eyes. "Then give it to another warrior. The clan comes first, Iceslide, though I know you have a hard time seeing that."

Her words stung him, but he remained calm and collected. "You're my clan leader, and you have to eat. We need you." With that, he turned toward the mouth of the den, leaving the mouse with her.

"Iceslide?" She spoke suddenly. He paused and looked over his shoulder, and she gave him a small nod. "Thank you." She paused. "I'd like you to speak to some of your friends in other clans at the gathering tomorrow night. They might know-"

The gathering! He froze, his blood turning to ice as he remembered what he'd told Bone Shred. The rogue leader had forced him to give him more information in exchange for Truffle and Dime's lives, however, he had had them killed anyway.

"Shimmerstar!" He quickly returned to her, and she looked at him sharply in question, alarmed at his sudden panic. "I have to tell you something." He hated to do it. He knew she would be furious. But he couldn't let more cats die.

He blurted out everything, how he and Sunripple had gone to Bone Shred's camp in an attempt free the kittypets, and Bone Shred had forced him to reveal something of use to him. By the time he was finished, Shimmerstar was staring at him with a horrified look on her face. "I'm sorry!" He meowed guiltily, unable to meet her gaze. "I didn't mean to- I-"

"That's enough." She cut him off, and he fell silent, looking at her anxiously. Her teal eyes flicked back and forth at the ground as she thought quickly. "I'll call a meeting and tell the clan. At least we'll be prepared for this attack."

***

The clan had been shocked and alarmed at Shimmerstar's news. To Iceslide's surprise, she lied about his visit to Bone Shred's camp. Instead, she told them that he had overheard the rogues mention an attack at fourtrees during the attack on the patrol days earlier, and due to the shock of the attack, he hadn't remembered until now.

The cats had made great use of every moment of the little time they had to prepare. Frostedcloud and a large patrol had spent the rest of the day going to each clan and warning them of the attack that would take place the next night. Every leader agreed to bring as many warriors to the gathering as they could spare, while leaving a fair amount to guard the queens and elders in the camps just in case.

Other cats were practicing battle moves in the camp. Even the newest apprentices, Wetpaw, Tansypaw, and Frostpaw were receiving early battle training, though they would remain in the

camp during the gathering.

By the time the night of the gathering arrived, every cat was nervous, but prepared. They were heading for fourtrees now, trekking through the snow. Iceslide padded alongside Winterlight, who shivered as her long belly fur brushed against the snow.

"Do you think we're prepared enough?" Winterlight asked quietly. "I mean... How many rogues are there? Do we outnumber them?"

Iceslide wasn't sure what to say. "I hope so." He thought back to the last time he'd been in Bone Shred's camp. There had been tons of cats, more than they had in RiverClan he was sure. *Five clans have to outnumber them...* He thought. *Don't they?*

They crossed the frozen river, and Iceslide looked up as they neared the clearing, the great oaks towering over the snow. The other clans were already gathered, and he was amazed by how many cats there were. Each clan had brought twice as many warriors as they normally would. Every cat looked on guard and nervous. Fourtrees was supposed to be a place of peace. Yet tonight, it felt cold and unwelcoming.

As the RiverClan cats joined them, several cats spun, fur bristling. When they recognized the warriors, they relaxed. Every cat is expecting the rogues to appear at any moment. Iceslide sat down with Winterlight among his clanmates while Shimmerstar joined the other leaders on the great rock.

For a while, no cat seemed to know what to do. The cats gathered below murmured anxiously to one another, looking around them, while the leaders hesitated, unsure whether to wait for the attack or start the gathering as usual.

They waited for some time before at last, Stormstar rose his voice from the great rock. "I suppose we should begin the gathering," He meowed.

"A regular gathering at a time like this?" Mudslip muttered from behind Iceslide. "Yeah, right!" Several other cats murmured agreement among themselves.

Ravenfeather dug his claws into the snow, his thick black tail lashing. "I can't wait to sink my teeth into those fleabags," He growled.

Despite the feedback from below, Stormstar continued. "ShadowClan has lost warriors to the rogues, and though no one wants to talk about it right now, I must honor them. Baconstripe has been killed, as well as our deputy, Pinetail. She died bravely." He looked down at the roots of the oaks. "Depthwater is the new deputy of ShadowClan."

The dark blue-black tom sat, looking solemn, but determined in his new role. Many cats congratulated him, though the majority were too unsettled to celebrate anything.

Iceslide was saddened by the loss of his friend. *Baconstripe was a great cat.* Among the deputies, even Strawberryspots looked solemn, despite having butted heads with Pinetail many times.

"Our medicine cat, Hawkfeather, has taken on an apprentice," Stormstar meowed. "Dewpaw has begun training as a medicine cat." The tom's eyes shone with pride, and Iceslide remembered that he was Dewpaw's father. "He remained at the camp tonight to help a wounded warrior."

When Stormstar finished, Gladestar stepped forward and began speaking for WindClan, followed by Shimmerstar and Whitestar. However, most cats weren't paying attention anymore. They were murmuring even louder now, glancing around them.

"Where are they?" Dipfoot whispered to Mudslip. "The gathering is almost over."

"Maybe they changed their mind?" Swanpool suggested hopefully.

Iceslide prayed that she was right. He shifted his paws in the snow nervously as the last leader, Birchstar, spoke. *Could they really have changed their minds? Maybe they forgot what I said? Maybe they saw how many of us there were and turned back?*

When Birchstar finished speaking for ThunderClan, he hesitated,

looking around uncertainly. He too was wondering about the attack. He looked back at the other leaders, who also looked puzzled. After a moment, he looked back to the gathered cats. "I suppose if no one else has anything to announce, the gathering is-"

"We aren't too late, are we?"

Every cat froze as a sixth cat leaped onto the great rock behind the leaders, his skull bright against his dark fur. The leaders spun in shock, and Stormstar let out a snarl, lunging for him, but Bone Shred was a bigger cat. He swung a hard blow at him, knocking the ShadowClan leader clear off the great rock.

Suddenly, every cat became aware of the rogues creeping toward them from all around, growling and sneering. There were more cats than Iceslide remembered. *Could he have recruited more in this short time?* He wondered anxiously.

Every cat gasped and yowled anxiously as the other leaders stood at the edges of the rock and faced Bone Shred, bristling and growling.

"You're not welcome here!" Whitestar spat at him.

Bone Shred ignored her and raised his voice. "I'll give you a chance!" He announced, his voice cool and deep. "Leave this forest and never return." He turned to the leaders, waiting patiently for an answer.

"Never!" Shimmerstar snarled furiously, her tail lashing madly. "This is our home!"

The dark rogue slowly dipped his head. "Very well. If that's your choice." He raised his voice in a furious yowl that rang through the night. "Attack! Don't stop until every last one of them is dead!"

Instantly, the clearing turned into a battlefield. Cats around him yowled and launched themselves into battle with the rogues, snarling and clawing.

Iceslide gasped as he was knocked over and slashed in the shoulder, and he found himself grappling with Oil Tail. The Siamese tom clawed and snarled as he bit and clawed at him with so much

speed, Iceslide hardly had time to react.

He let out a yowl and clamped his teeth around Oil Tail's thin foreleg, and the rogue screeched in pain as Iceslide tossed him away, hissing.

Not far from him, Ravenfeather was gripping Dark Hawk, raking his claws deep across his chest and ripping up tufts of dark fur with his hind claws. The rogue yowled and tried to get away, but Ravenfeather dragged him down and sank his teeth into his neck, and Dark Hawk's struggles grew weaker and weaker until he went still.

At first, Iceslide was stunned. *Warriors don't kill in battle.* But these rogues weren't warriors. They were heartless killers, and they deserved to die for all the cats they'd killed. He looked around in alarm. A pawful of clan cats were fleeing in terror. *No!*

Dipfoot and Shallowpool were fighting two rogues, yowling and clawing at them. One of them lunged forward and thrust Shallowpool into the snow, slashing at her throat. Dipfoot yowled and leaped at the rogue, digging his claws into his shoulders.

Buzzardglare of ShadowClan was fighting Shredded Ivy, snarling with anger. The rogue swung forward and slashed her claws across his eye before he could shut it, and the tabby let out a shriek of pain as he collapsed.

Iceslide noticed Howl and Dandelion standing on the edge of the clearing, looking frightened and hesitant. He understood why. *They don't want to kill anyone. But if they fight against Bone Shred, they'll be killed by his cats. They don't know what to do.*

Suddenly, Dandelion let out a shriek and raced into the battle to crouch by the body of a smaller tabby, letting out a wail of grief. "Bristle, no!"

That's their son. He realized sadly as Howl ran over and pressed against his mate, staring down at Bristle's body numbly.

By the great rock, the leaders had leaped down into battle,

screeching with fury. Shimmerstar was biting a rogue in the shoulder as she gripped him, while Stormstar and Birchstar had Heart Burn pinned down.

The medicine cats had the least battle training and were having the most difficulty. Poisoned Sap had Junglefoot pinned in the snow, slashing at his face. Whitestar leaped to her medicine cat's aid and shot into Poisoned Sap, but a heartbeat later, Shadow Snarl lunged at the SkyClan leader and fastened his teeth into her neck while Poisoned Sap slashed her spine.

Are they dead? Iceslide started toward them when another rogue crashed into him, sneering. "This is our land, fish-fur!"

"No!" Iceslide struggled against the rogue, panicking when he realized he was too heavy. He was helpless against this cat. The rogue raised his claws to slash him when Winterlight slammed into him and knocked him away from Iceslide, snarling.

The next thing he knew, Bone Shred was beside him, pinning Stormstar and snarling at him. "Retreat now, fool," He sneered. "Or more cats will die."

The tabby's eyes flared with anger. But he let out a yowl. "ShadowClan, retreat!"

Iceslide looked around in disbelief as ShadowClan fled the battle. Seeing they were even more outnumbered, the other leaders called off their cats.

"SkyClan, retreat!" Raventuft, the clan deputy was yowling, and Iceslide realized in horror that Whitestar must be dead.

"ThunderClan, retreat!"

"WindClan, retreat!"

Shimmerstar staggered to her paws and shook blood from her eyes. "RiverClan, retreat!"

No! Iceslide thought in dismay. *We can't give up!* Feeling helpless, he ran after his clanmates through the snow.

Behind them, Bone Shred stood on the great rock, the clearing below surrounded by his rogues. "This place is ours now!" He yowled after the fleeing cats. "And soon, every bit of this forest will be!"

Chapter 28

[image]

It's a mess. Iceslide lay in his nest, his eyes half open as he stared out into the snowy clearing where cats were murmuring to one another anxiously. *It's a nightmare. And I'm the source of it.*

"We have to leave the forest!" Duckwing exclaimed, looking around at his clanmates. "If we stay here, they'll pick us off one by one until we're all dead!"

Dipfoot spun to face the young cat, eyes lit with anger. "Never!" He spat. "Shallowpool died in the battle last night, and she didn't die for nothing!"

"So you want more cats to die?" Vixenwhisper hissed.

Petalfin raised her voice. "This is our home!"

"That's enough!" Frostedcloud was weaving around his clanmates, struggling to calm them. "We need to-"

The cats ignored him and continued arguing, and he looked over his shoulder at Shimmerstar helplessly. The clan leader turned and leaped onto the tree stump, yowling. "Silence! Every cat gather around."

The clan slowly calmed and looked up at Shimmerstar, fur bristling, some in fear, others in anger. Iceslide got up and padded out of the den, looking up at her. He hoped that she still had the ability to gather her distressed clan. Last night's defeat couldn't have made her any more confident.

"All the clans suffered at the gathering," She meowed quietly. "We lost Shallowpool, a fine warrior who fought bravely for us." She seemed to be having difficulty finding the right words in her distressed state. "Three of the medicine cats were killed. Junglefoot, Hivepelt, and Flowerwing."

By the medicine den, Otterpelt stared at her paws, her eyes filled with grief for her lost friends. *We're lucky we didn't lose her.* Iceslide thought.

"Whitestar was killed, and I believe that Raventuft is going to attempt the journey to the moonstone to receive his nine lives." Shimmerstar closed her eyes. "I pray that he gets there safely."

The clan murmured quietly, and Iceslide looked down. What would happen if Raventuft was killed? His clan would be leaderless and vulnerable. *The rogues would be sure to finish SkyClan off...*

"Gladestar tells me that they've taken two of Bone Shred's rogues prisoner," Shimmerstar added. "She hopes to get information out of them that we can use."

Could it be Howl and Dandelion? Iceslide wondered with a start. Before he could consider this further, Shimmerstar went on. "Otterpelt would like to speak." She stepped down from the stump, her tail dragging behind her while the medicine cat took her place.

"I-I have something to say." Otterpelt stared at her clanmates with a sorrowful look on her face. She gave herself a shake and drew in a deep breath. "Moons ago, before leaf-bare began, StarClan sent me a vision of blood and death for our clan. I told you about this." She swallowed. "But... There's a lot I didn't tell you. Maplesky felt that I should keep it a secret to avoid causing panic."

"What?" Mudslip bristled, leaping to his paws. "What kind of medicine cat hides things from their clan?"

Swanpool nodded, looking anxious. "You're supposed to guide us!"

Iceslide remembered how moons ago he had overheard Otterpelt, Maplesky, and Shimmerstar speaking about this. They'd agreed to lie to avoid causing panic. But now, with everything that had happened, the truth needed to be revealed.

Otterpelt shrank back, her eyes filled with guilt. Frostedcloud jumped to her defense. "Let her speak!" He snapped.

With a grateful nod to the deputy, Otterpelt went on. "Not long

after the first vision, I began receiving more. So much blood..." Her eyes grew distant, as if she were re-imagining the horrors she had seen. "I'd be in the camp, surrounded by the bodies of my clanmates, bloody and torn apart..." She gave herself a shake before she went on. "At the moonstone, I begged StarClan to tell me what to do, how to stop this... All they said was... 'The cat who explores will bring death to the forest'. I soon realized it was Iceslide."

Every cat looked at him, and he froze under their fierce gazes, his heart pounding rapidly in his chest. He felt dizzy. *StarClan knew I would do this...! StarClan knows I'm responsible...*

The clan began snarling at Iceslide and yowling angrily, and he shrank back, his eyes wide and his heart racing. Winterlight pressed to his side, ready to defend him.

"That cat has always been trouble!" Dipfoot hissed.

"Frozenripple and my kits are dead because of you!" Petalfin cried.

Tansypaw leaped to her paws, glaring at Iceslide. "And my father!"

"I'm sorry!" Iceslide choked out, feeling ready to burst with guilt. *I'm a terrible cat, and even StarClan foresaw that!*

"That's enough!" Shimmerstar yowled, and he looked up to see that she was on the stump again. Otterpelt was crouched outside her den, her head low. The cats fell silent, but continued glaring at him. "Iceslide did not kill our clanmates. The rogues did. Is that clear?"

No cat agreed, but none dared to disagree either. With that, Shimmerstar called the meeting to an end and left the tree stump.

Some cats dispersed, while others stayed watching Iceslide coldly.

"Idiot." Arcticblaze muttered. "The idiot of the forest."

"You're the most selfish, irresponsible cat I've ever known," Dipfoot growled at him. "You shouldn't be a warrior."

Iceslide stared as the gray tom padded away, lashing his tail. He let out a sigh. *They're right. They're completely right.* He looked toward

the medicine den where Otterpelt was padding inside.

"Are you okay?" Winterlight asked him quietly. "Don't listen to them."

No. I'm not okay. I won't be okay until this is over. He closed his eyes. "I need to talk to Otterpelt." He opened his eyes and headed over to the medicine den, waiting by the entrance.

Otterpelt noticed him, and her expression filled with guilt. "O-oh, Iceslide..." She didn't seem to know what to say after she'd called him out in front of the whole clan.

"Can I talk to you?" He asked quietly, and she nodded, gesturing with her tail for him to come in. He stepped further into the den and sat down in front of her, lowering his head.

She shifted her paws uneasily. "Iceslide, I'm really sorry-"

"No, you have nothing to be sorry for," He meowed, realizing too late that he had interrupted his medicine cat. *Great, I'm not making myself look any better!* He looked at her apologetically, but she nodded and waited for him to continue.

"I've been selfish, stupid, and ignorant," Iceslide went on, his heart aching as he spoke the truth that he himself hadn't wanted to believe. "I should never have left RiverClan territory." He looked up at her numbly. "You tried to warn me. You told me to stay, but I wouldn't listen." She nodded, and he pressed on desperately. "Why didn't you stop me? Tell Shimmerstar to confine me to the camp or something?"

Otterpelt shook her head. "There was no stopping you, Iceslide," She meowed quietly. "You wanted to see your friends, and you went to great lengths to do that. Shimmerstar could have tied you up with reeds, and you still would have found a way to twolegplace."

Iceslide hung his head. "I'm sorry," He murmured. "I'd take it all back if I could."

"There's no going back now." She looked down. "We must face what has happened."

He stared at her desperately. "There has to be a way to end this," He meowed anxiously. "Haven't you seen anything?"

The medicine cat hesitated. She meowed slowly, seeming to choose her words carefully. "You will know what to do when the time comes."

***

The sun was setting now. Iceslide was returning to his nest, ready to go to sleep. He curled up in his nest and closed his eyes, sighing softly. Ever since he'd spoken with Otterpelt, he'd been thinking about her words.

You'll know what to do when the time comes.

What's that supposed to mean? He wondered anxiously. *What am I supposed to do to stop this, and how will I possibly know when?* He lay awake for hours thinking about it until eventually he drifted off into sleep.

***

"Help! Help me!"

A cry made Iceslide jerk awake, his eyes snapping open. He raised his head, trembling from the shock of being woken up so fast. *That sounds like an apprentice!* The other warriors were awakening and hurrying out of the den, and he quickly followed.

No! Horror blazed through Iceslide's body when he stepped into the clearing. *Oh no, no!*

Bone Shred stood in the middle of the camp, pinning Wetpaw on his stomach. The apprentice's eyes were frantic and full of terror as the rogue leader dug his claws into the young tom's shoulders.

Behind him were Poisoned Sap and Crimson Ice, who stood over the bodies of Vixenwhisper and Heronleg, who had been guarding the camp. By the stepping stones were the rest of the rogues, more than Iceslide could count.

Mudslip let out a cry and started toward his dead mate, but Dipfoot grabbed his scruff and held him back.

"Wetpaw!" Heartsong shrieked when she saw her kit pinned under the rogue leader. "Let him go!"

Otterpelt hung back by the medicine den, her eyes full of fear, while Shimmerstar and Frostedcloud cautiously stepped to the front of the RiverClan cats to face Bone Shred.

"Why have you done this?" Shimmerstar's voice cracked as she spoke, glaring at Bone Shred. "Let Wetpaw go and get out of my camp."

Bone Shred's tail swished slowly back and forth as he fixed his hollow gaze on the RiverClan leader. "That's no way to welcome a visitor." He meowed coolly.

"You are not welcome here," Frostedcloud growled, his eyes narrowed. "This is our camp. This is our forest. Not a pawstep of it belongs to you."

When the rogue leader said nothing, seeming amused, Shimmerstar took a step forward, her eyes filled with despair. "Let us live in peace," She begged, and every cat seemed shocked and saddened by her display of weakness. "Isn't that what we all want? Stay on your land, and we'll stay on ours. End this madness."

"There is no madness!" Bone Shred sounded amused, and Wetpaw whimpered as he dug his claws deeper into his back. "I'm simply taking what belongs to me. But you won't cooperate." He paused, studying her. "You're a cat of honor, aren't you?"

Shimmerstar narrowed her eyes as he want on, his voice rumbling coolly. "Very well, let's end this." His head lowered as he locked his dark, empty gaze on her. "I challenge you to a fight. Just the two of us. Whoever wins will get what they want."

"And by winning, you mean the stronger cat?" Shimmerstar narrowed her eyes.

"No. Whoever is left standing." Bone Shred rumbled smoothly. "We

will fight to the death. If you win, my cats will leave the forest for good." He sounded amused when he said this, as if he didn't believe there was any chance he could be beaten.

The RiverClan leader looked down. "And if you win?" She murmured.

"If I win?" Bone Shred's voice grew hard with menace. "If I win, I'll make sure that every last cat in this forest from the oldest elder to the newborn kit is dead at my paws."

The cats looked at each other anxiously. Shimmerstar was staring back at him silently, and Iceslide realized with a rush of shock that she was considering accepting his challenge. *No! She can't beat him!*

As she hesitated, Frostedcloud stepped to her side, his eyes wide. "Shimmerstar-"

"I accept." Shimmerstar met the rogue's gaze steadily.

As the cats around her gasped, Bone Shred dipped his head and purred. "I look forward to it. Tomorrow morning, I will meet you by the river."

"Very well." Shimmerstar looked at Wetpaw. "Now let him go."

Bone Shred looked down at the apprentice as he struggled under him, whimpering as blood trickled from his shoulders. Then, he lunged down and sank his teeth into his neck. Wetpaw shrieked and struggled desperately until the rogue let go, and his head thumped to the ground, his blood pooling into the snow.

"No!" Heartsong shrieked and tried to get to her kit, but Cherryberry and Mudslip blocked her way. She began wailing heavily.

Bone Shred backed off of the body and nodded to it. "Consider that an example of what will happen when I win," He meowed. With a nod to his cats, they turned away and left the camp.

"Wetpaw!" Heartsong cried and ran to the dead apprentice, covering him with licks and sobbing. Tansypaw and Frostpaw rushed to her side, staring at their brother in shock.

Every other cat in the clan was focused on Shimmerstar, meowing and crying out anxiously.

"Shimmerstar, you can't!" Swanpool wailed. "That monster will kill you!"

"We need you to lead us!" Dipfoot insisted. "More than ever!"

Darkminnow leaped to his paws. "No, wait! You're a leader with nine lives! So you'll be fine if you lose."

The RiverClan leader was quiet for a moment. "This is my last life," She revealed quietly.

The clearing burst into panic. Iceslide stared at Shimmerstar in shock, his heart racing in his chest. *No!*

"Shimmerstar, no!" Frostedcloud faced her, his eyes full of anxiety. "You can't do this!"

The dappled silver she-cat looked away. "Frostedcloud, this is my decision," She told him. "I will either put an end to this, or give my life for my clan. You will lead them well." She dropped her gaze. "And I'll get to be with Salmonstripe and our kits again."

As the cats continued to yowl and protest, Iceslide's mind spun. *Oh, StarClan! This is terrible!* The thought of Shimmerstar, in her weak and defeated state, facing a powerful, merciless cat like Bone Shred terrified him. His heart thumped hard against his rib cage. *We cannot lose our leader! The clan is in enough panic as is. They're depending on Shimmerstar to lead them through it!*

Suddenly, for the first time in moons, he understood exactly what he had to do. It was clear as the water in the river. Clearer than the stars in the sky. *I know now. I know what Otterpelt meant. My time to act is now.* Without any hesitation, he took a step forward. "Shimmerstar, let me fight in your place."

Every cat went silent and stared at him in shock and disbelief. Shimmerstar turned to him sharply, her eyes widening. "Iceslide-"

"The clan needs you!" Iceslide insisted, feeling strangely undaunted

as every cat watched him in amazement. "You need to lead them through this. But no one needs me." He padded over to his leader and met her gaze. "I caused all of this. I must be the one to put an end to it. I will fight Bone Shred with all the strength I have, and if I die, then it will be the most selfless thing I've ever done for this clan."

When Shimmerstar didn't speak, her eyes filled with emotion, Iceslide stared at her, his heart filled with sadness. "Please. After all the death and suffering I've caused, I'm more than willing to sacrifice myself for RiverClan. For you. For every cat I've helped send to StarClan."

Shimmerstar stared back at him, her eyes filled with sorrow. Beside her, Frostedcloud was looking at Iceslide uncertainly. Winterlight was staring at Iceslide numbly, while others exchanged looks of sadness and unease. No cat looked angry with him, and it surprised him. Every cat seemed shocked and saddened by his offer. Even Dipfoot, who had scorned him the day before, couldn't look at him. By the medicine den, Otterpelt watched Iceslide sadly. She gave him a tiny nod.

After a long moment, Shimmerstar stepped forward and rested her chin on his head. Iceslide closed his eyes as she spoke softly. "Very well, Iceslide," Her voice cracked with emotion. "Thank you. You may fight in my place."

Chapter 29

[image]

Iceslide sat alone in the darkness of the camp, his eyes fixed ahead of him. The dark indigo sky was gradually fading into a bright orange light that peered over the horizon of the snowy forest. The stars of silverpelt were beginning to fade into the light of dawn.

It's almost time. Iceslide drew in a deep breath of cold air, then exhaled. *When the sun rises, I go to fight Bone Shred. I fight for my clan, and the fate of the forest.* He couldn't deny that he was afraid. But not because of the chance that Bone Shred would kill him. Because the lives of every cat in the forest depended on this fight. If he died, the clans would die with him.

He had been awake for a while now. Otterpelt had urged him to get as much sleep as he could to prepare for the fight, but once he'd woken up, he'd been unable to fall back asleep again. He was too nervous. Despite waking up early, he didn't feel tired. In fact, he felt more awake than ever, both physically and mentally.

The soft crunching of snow caught his attention, and he flicked an ear back as he glanced over his shoulder. Shimmerstar was padding over to him. He turned his gaze back to the sky as she quietly sat down beside him. It was silent for a long moment as they watched the dawn sky together.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" She asked quietly.

He gave a subtle nod.

After a few moments, Shimmerstar looked at him. "Are you afraid?" She murmured.

Iceslide hesitated. "Yes," He admitted quietly. "I'm afraid of losing. Everything depends on this battle."

"The fate of the clans is on your shoulders," She responded. "That's a lot of pressure for one cat. The kind that a leader faces every day."

For the first time in his life, Iceslide felt a great wave of respect for his leader. He'd always been selfish and annoyed by the clan rules that she reinforced. He'd never thought about how much pressure she had always been under, protecting her clan and knowing that any decision she made could effect the other clans as well. "I'm honored to be one of your warriors," He meowed quietly. "Even if I've never acted like one."

They sat together in silence for a long moment. "You know, Lilynose talked about you often," She told him quietly. "She believed in you. She would tell me that you were a great warrior, you were just different." She paused. "I disagreed. I still do."

Iceslide glanced at her in surprise. *That's a nice thing to say to someone who's about to risk their life on your behalf.*

"You're not a great warrior, Iceslide, but you're a great cat." Shimmerstar turned her head to him, her eyes filled with respect. "And I think that says more about you."

Somehow, her words comforted him. He wasn't sure that he agreed with her. But knowing that she meant it gave him a sense of purpose and reassurance. "Thank you," He murmured. It was quiet again as they watched the sun begin to rise over the forest.

Time seemed to fly by. The sky was a pale navy color, streaked with clouds. It was nearly time to go. Some cats were waking up and padding out of their dens to get fresh kill and groom themselves. Most were watching Iceslide.

"He has to win this," Dipfoot murmured. "We're all depending on him."

Ravenfeather arched his back as he stretched. "Not exactly the cat I'd like to depend on in this situation," He muttered. Not far from

him, Risingmoon shot him a glare.

"I think he can do it," Warmmoss meowed. "He has to."

Hearing his clanmates talk made him more nervous, and he tried to ignore them. He was relieved when he saw Winterlight padding over to him, carrying a plump mouse. With a dip of his head to Shimmerstar, Iceslide turned and stepped forward to meet his sister.

Winterlight dropped the mouse at his paws. "Here. You need to eat."

He shook his head. "I'm not really hungry." He was far too worried to eat.

"Too bad, you have to eat anyway. You need your strength." Winterlight's yellow eyes were brimming with fear and desperation. "You don't have to do this. W-we can find another way-"

"Winterlight," Iceslide cut her off gently. "I have to. This is what I'm meant to do."

She stared at him numbly. "I've already lost Grayshadow, Whitedapple, Ravenfeather... Blizzardfur..." She swallowed. "I can't lose you too."

Feeling a rush of compassion for his sister, he stepped forward and rubbed his cheek against hers. "Whatever happens, you'll be fine," He murmured. "You're the greatest warrior in RiverClan." She pressed her muzzle into his fur.

"Iceslide?"

They moved away from each other and turned as Otterpelt approached, carrying a leafy bundle of herbs. She dropped them in front of Iceslide. "These are travelling herbs," She meowed quietly. "They'll give you strength." She looked at the mouse Winterlight had brought. "Eat that, too."

Iceslide reluctantly obeyed, crouching and chewing up the herbs, grimacing at the awful taste. He nibbled at the mouse and was only able to eat about half of it before his nerves turned his stomach.

"Are you sure you can do this?"

He looked up to see Frostedcloud standing over him, looking uncertain. "Bone Shred is a strong cat."

Iceslide sat up. "I know," He responded quietly. "But I'm fighting for more than he is. That will give me strength."

The clan deputy slowly nodded. Iceslide felt a pang of guilt for how he'd disrespected Frostedcloud so many times when he'd only been doing his duties, keeping the clan organized and out of danger. On the chance that he would die today, he decided that he owed him a few words.

"I'm sorry I never listened to you," Iceslide meowed quietly. Frostedcloud glanced at him, a flicker of surprise in his eyes as he went on. "You're a good deputy, Frostedcloud, and you'll be a great leader someday."

For a moment, Frostedcloud seemed lost for words. Then he gave a small nod, sadness in his blue eyes. "Thank you, Iceslide."

"Iceslide?"

He turned and saw his clanmates gathered by the camp entrance. Shimmerstar and Otterpelt were at the head of the group, waiting for him.

"It's time," Shimmerstar meowed quietly.

It's time... Iceslide echoed the words in his head. He drew in a deep breath and followed Frostedcloud over to the others. He hesitated, looking over his shoulder at the camp. His home. The place where he belonged. Will I see it again? He wondered. If I die?

He could see Cherryberry laying in the nursery, watching him anxiously. Her kits had raced to the mouth of the den, watching the warriors excitedly.

"Goodbye!" Rainkit squeaked, her little tail high in the air. "You can do it!"

Lemonkit jumped up and down. "Go get him!"

For once, the sight of kits made Iceslide's heart warm. *They're the future of the clan. I'm fighting for them.*

With a last gaze around the camp, he turned to Shimmerstar. "Let's go."

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The sun had risen, and the sky was pale and bright as they neared the frozen river. The air felt colder than ever, but Iceslide was sure that it was just his nerves amplifying his senses. He looked up as they padded through the snow. Bone Shred and his cats hadn't arrived yet.

They stopped in the snowy bank beside the river, and Iceslide became aware of Shimmerstar at his side. "Go onto the river," She meowed.

He blinked at her in surprise. "What?"

"You have an advantage over him," Shimmerstar told him as she watched the river. "You're a RiverClan cat. You can swim. He can't."

Iceslide immediately understood. If I can get him to fall through the ice, he'll drown. He turned away, and she followed him as he padded onto the frozen river, the cool surface smooth under his pads. *I'll have to be careful not to slip.* He unsheathed his claws slightly, pricking the surface of the ice.

Shimmerstar stood beside him and looked at him with a solemn expression. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready." He stared ahead of him, waiting for the rogues to arrive. He wasn't so nervous anymore. Now, he felt determined and full of hope. *This is my destiny. This is what I'm meant to do.* He could feel it like fire in his bones.

"Good luck, Iceslide." Shimmerstar leaned closer and rested her chin on his head, as if she were naming a new warrior. "Whatever happens, RiverClan will honor you for this," She murmured.

"StarClan will honor you."

He closed is eyes for a moment as he considered her words. *Will StarClan honor me after I caused the deaths of so many cats? After I broke the warrior code in so many ways?*

As Shimmerstar turned away and padded back up the bank to join the rest of the clan, Iceslide looked ahead of him, waiting for the rogues to arrive. He stretched his legs and flexed his muscles, making sure that he was ready.

He needed to fight like he never had before. He stared into the snowy distance and thought of all the cats who had died because of his terrible mistakes. *Lilynose, you just wanted me to love you. I'm so sorry I didn't see that. You deserved a better cat anyway. You could have grown old with kits of your own, like you always wanted. Creekleap was so fun and playful. He loved Heartsong and his kits. Frozenripple taught me everything from swimming to hunting. He was always patient with me.*

His heart throbbed. *Grayshadow and Whitedapple, you were such good parents. You loved me so much. I'm sorry I disappointed you. And Blizzardfur, my brother... You would have been a great father. I wish I'd spent more time with you and Winterlight instead of running off all the time. Divetail, Shorestep, Maplesky, Heronleg, Salmonstripe... Wetpaw, Willowpaw, and Eelpaw, who will never receive their warrior names. Truffle, fun and cheerful Truffle, and Juicy, who would have lived out the rest of his days lounging in his yard. Violet, my love... You can never go outside again because of me. Sunripple... I hope you're with Dreamwhisper now. I'm sorry you couldn't stay and watch your kits grow up.*

The names and memories of each cat flooded through his very soul. It both saddened him and gave him strength he'd never felt before. *I'm fighting for you.* He silently told them. *I'm fighting for every single one of you today.*

Movement in the distance caught his attention, and he broke out of his thoughts, looking up. Bone Shred was approaching, followed by a large group of rogues. They stopped by the snowy bank, and the rogue leader tilted his head, looking at Iceslide. "What's this?" He

called in amusement. "Was Shimmerstar too afraid to fight me?"

"No, Bone Shred." Iceslide met his hollow gaze steadily. "And neither am I."

The dark tom studied him for a moment, then twitched his tail in satisfaction. "Very well, Iceslide. I've looked forward to the opportunity to tear you apart." He lowered his head as he watched him. "Won't you come up here to face me?"

"I say we fight here on the river," Iceslide meowed, feeling strangely confident and ready. "Unless you're afraid." He knew that Bone Shred would never back down from a comment like that.

And he was right. Bone Shred studied him for a moment, his tail lashing with offense. "I don't feel fear." He growled and padded onto the ice to face him. They were several fox lengths away from each other.

Iceslide glanced behind him. The RiverClan warriors were watching him, their expressions full of worry and unease. Shimmerstar stood by a snowbank, staring at him with a saddened, but hopeful look in her eyes. Otterpelt was crouched near her over some bundles of herbs, ready to treat Iceslide's wounds if he came out of this alive.

Behind Bone Shred, his rogues were gathered, watching with their eyes lit with menace and excitement. They were ready to see Iceslide die. Poisoned Sap and Shredded Ivy watched him through narrowed eyes.

"Let's begin." Bone Shred watched him steadily, a growl rumbling in his throat as he crouched, his muscles flexing under his black fur.

The time is now. Everything starts and ends now. Iceslide narrowed his eyes and crouched, feeling determination flood through his veins. Please, StarClan. Help me win this for the clans!

With an angry snarl, Bone Shred launched himself at Iceslide. In that moment, the world around him vanished, and all that existed was the fury between he and Bone Shred, and everything that he was fighting for.

Iceslide rose on his hind legs to meet the rogue as he cannoned into him, slamming his skulled head into his stomach. He gasped out as the air was knocked out of him, and he slid onto his back on the ice with Bone Shred snarling in his face and digging his claws into him.

With a furious yowl, Iceslide slammed his hind paws hard up into Bone Shred's stomach, slashing him open with his claws. The rogue yowled as he was thrust over onto his side, and the two cats continued madly biting and clawing at each other, screeching and sending tufts of black and white fur flying everywhere.

Iceslide howled as the rogue's claws seared across his face, and he lashed back at him only to have his claws hit his skull mask harmlessly. *Fox dung!* The rogue slammed him down.

CRACK

Iceslide gasped as the ice cracked under him, and he quickly grasped Bone Shred's shoulders with his claws, struggling with all his strength to push him over and through the ice, but the rogue pinned him firmly and snarled, pressing harder until the ice creaked under them. Iceslide twisted onto his stomach to pull free, yowling as claws sliced his skin.

CRACK

An even louder crack sent tiny shards of ice splintering into Iceslide's chest, and he gasped as the cracks in the ice gave away and sent icy water splashing up into his face. Claws gripped his neck, and Iceslide's heart jolted with shock as Bone Shred plunged his head into the water, the current flooding into his ears.

Panic shot through him as the icy water rushed into his mouth and down his throat, and he struggled frantically to free himself and get his head above water.

"Not so good at swimming, huh fish face?" Bone Shred sneered above him, and Iceslide struggled desperately. *StarClan, help me! I'm going to drown!*

Thinking quickly, he put his panic under control and stopped

struggling, going limp. He felt Bone Shred's grip loosen, and he immediately thrust backwards out of the water, knocking Bone Shred aside and sucking in air with a deep gasp.

He trembled and choked up a mouthful of water, shaking his soaked head and looking at Bone Shred shakily. The rogue was badly wounded, blood streaming through his fur.

The dark tom hissed and sank his teeth into Iceslide's shoulder, swinging and sending him skidding and rolling across the ice. He cried in pain and gasped out, staggering to his paws and panting as he faced the rogue again. *StarClan, help me!* His muscles were burning with exhaustion, and he could feel his fur wet with blood. The ice between them was splattered with blood and tufts of fur.

Bone Shred spat up a mouthful of fur and blood, his flanks heaving as he stood, a growl rumbling in his throat. With a screech, Iceslide lunged at Bone Shred and sank his teeth into his throat, pushing him onto his back and digging his claws into his shoulders. The rogue lunged upward and buried his fangs into Iceslide's neck, and he shrieked in pain, pulling free and feeling his teeth rip his flesh.

Iceslide yowled and swung a forepaw at Bone Shred's throat. The rogue ducked a heartbeat too late, and his paw hit the skull, knocking it clean off his head. It made a hollow clanging sound as it hit the ice and caused another crack. Bone Shred panted and glared up at Iceslide, and he let out a shaky gasp.

The tom's face was a horrifying sight to see. From his nose to his ears, he had no fur, only raw skin and flesh in disgusting tones of brown and salmon. The skin was bumpy and dark in some areas around his eyes, which were a very pale yellow. Iceslide couldn't imagine what could have caused any cat to look so hideous.

Bone Shred seemed stunned by the removal of the skull, which he must have been wearing for seasons, and Iceslide took advantage of this. He shot forward and knocked Bone Shred onto his side, slashing his claws across his face.

The rogue let out a horrible scream of agony as the sensitive raw skin was torn open, blood streaming from the cuts, and Iceslide

lunged for his neck. But the rogue twisted and pulled an arm free, swinging a heavy blow to the side of Iceslide's head.

He yowled and rolled over onto the ice, is head throbbing and his left ear going numb until all he heard was a high pitched squeal rising over the faint roar of battle. He could feel hot blood stinging his face and ear, and his movements felt slow and weaker. He shook blood from his eyelids and groaned. The world spun around him, and he struggled to focus on the swaying, blurred shape of Bone Shred that was moving toward him.

His unsteady gaze drifted behind the rogue where he saw a blurry patch of blue. *The hole...* He struggled to think clearly as his head pulsed. *Push him into the water...* He tried to yowl, but it came out more like a wail of pain as he lunged forward, slamming into the rogue.

Bone Shred shrieked and struggled against him by the edge of the hole in the ice, clawing at his chest, but Iceslide forced his exhausted, stinging body forward. *Come on!* He silently cried. *Almost!* With a last desperate shriek, he thrust forward and slammed Bone Shred backward.

With a yowl of alarm, the rogue fell backwards, hitting the water with a loud splash. He tried to grab the edge of the ice, but his claws slipped and his head and paw vanished under the surface.

Iceslide trembled and breathed hoarsely as he struggled to focus on the water. Bone Shred didn't resurface. *He's gone...* Under the buzzing of his ears, he could faintly hear the horrified cries and yowls of the rogues as they realized their leader was dead. *Howl and Dandelion were right... They'll follow him anywhere. But without him, they give up.*

He turned and stumbled toward the riverbank, but his paws gave out under him, and he collapsed onto the ice, groaning and closing his eyes.

"Iceslide!"

"You did it!"

He lifted his heavy eyelids. Otterpelt was crouched over him, her eyes wide, and Shimmerstar and Frostedcloud rushed over, but he could only make out their blurry shapes against the bright snow. His whole body throbbed and stung with wounds. *It's bad... Really bad...* He could taste blood in his mouth and smell it leaking down his nose. He could feel blood, wet and hot all over him. He had no idea where the worst of his wounds were. The pain was everywhere. Poisoned Sap's words from moons ago echoed in his head. *Curiosity killed the cat.*

Shimmerstar stared down at him numbly and crouched, touching her nose to his head. "Thank you, Iceslide," She murmured. "We will never forget you. StarClan will welcome you."

StarClan... Iceslide parted his jaws weakly to respond, but couldn't, and instead he choked up blood and tried to focus on the dimming world around him. Beyond Shimmerstar, starry shapes of cats began to appear, and he recognized them.

Lilynose... Blizzardfur... Grayshadow... Sunripple... All the cats he'd led to their deaths. They all looked down at him, their starlit eyes glowing with warmth and forgiveness. *I did it... I saved the clans...*

He moaned softly and gazed at them. He felt at peace as his vision faded into darkness, and the pain vanished from his body.

It's over. We won.

[image]

Chapter 30

[image]

The sun was rising over the pine forest. Most of the snow had melted, and only patches of it remained in the shadows of trees and dips in the ground where the sunlight couldn't reach it as quickly. Leaf-bare was finally coming to an end.

Maplefur crouched, sniffing for prey. He picked up the scent of frog and spotted it near the trunk of a pine tree. *It's a bit soon for frogs to return. But I'm not complaining. ShadowClan needs more prey.* He carefully crept over the pine needles toward it. When he was close enough, he sprang and grasped it in his claws, finishing it off with a nip to the neck.

When he carried it back to the patrol, the others looked at him approvingly. The two younger warriors, Cobratail and Poppywing, looked impressed.

"Great catch!" Poppywing exclaimed, and he dipped his head in thanks.

"The prey is running well today," Bluerain commented as she led her patrol through the trees. "Thank StarClan it's almost new-leaf!"

Not far from her, Crowmask nodded in agreement. "Between Bone Shred's rogues and the snow, it's a miracle we survived."

Thank StarClan that's over. Maplefur thought as he scraped a hole in the earth and buried his frog. Bone Shred's rogues had terrorized the clans for moons. Many cats had died, including Maplefur's parents, Baconstripe and Redblaze. He missed them terribly.

Things had been beginning to look hopeless when a RiverClan warrior named Iceslide fought Bone Shred for the fate of the forest. The RiverClan cat had defeated him, but it had cost him his own life. At the gathering following the battle, Shimmerstar had spoken highly of Iceslide, and every cat honored his bravery and sacrifice.

The rogues had retreated back to twolegplace, and the forest was safe once more.

"Let's try in the marsh by the WindClan border," Maplefur suggested. "We should catch some extra prey for Sunflower and her kits."

"We'd have better luck by the ThunderClan border," Cobratail pointed out, flicking his tail. "That way we'll be downwind. And the marsh hasn't completely thawed yet, so there won't be many frogs."

Realizing he was right, Maplefur dipped his head. "Great idea." Cobratail was very wise, despite being a young warrior like he was. Depthwater chose him often for patrols and relied on him nearly as much as the senior warriors.

They continued through the trees when suddenly the bushes rustled in front of them. Bluerain stopped, and the others halted behind her, their ears pricked and alert as they watched the bushes.

"What is it?" Maplefur murmured uncertainly. There was too much movement for it to be prey. It was something large, like a cat or a fox.

Crowmask sniffed the air and bristled. "Rogue!" He crouched and let out a snarl. "Come out and show yourself!"

The patrol spread out and stood, preparing to face the intruder. Maplefur unsheathed his claws and stared at the bush, his tail lashing slowly.

"Please don't hurt me!" A she-cat's voice rose from the bushes, rich with fear. "I mean you no harm."

"We'll be the judge of that!" Crowmask snapped, his neck fur bristling. "Show yourself, now!"

It was silent for a moment. Then the leaves rustled, and a golden she-cat stepped out of the bushes, her amber eyes wide and uneasy. "I-"

Before she could speak, Crowmask lunged at her and rolled her to

the ground, pinning her and hissing. Maplefur immediately shot forward in alarm. "What are you doing? He gasped.

"She's a rogue!" The black warrior snapped at him. He sniffed her and she flinched, her eyes lit with terror. "And one of Bone Shred's, too. I'd recognize that scent anywhere, I'm so sick of it." He raised an unsheathed paw.

No! Maplefur shouldered him away from her, and he staggered back, glaring at him sharply.

"Maplefur, what in the name of StarClan is wrong with you?" Crowmask spat.

He stepped in front of the rogue and bristled as he faced his clanmate. "She hasn't done any wrong," He pointed out sharply. "You attacked, not her. She said she meant us no harm. Let's find out why she's here and what she wants."

Crowmask opened his jaws to argue, but Bluerain interrupted. "You're right, Maplefur. But I think we'd better let Stormstar know she's on our territory, and hear what her excuse is." She turned her head. "Poppywing, go fetch him."

The reddish tabby she-cat nodded and turned, racing through the trees. Crowmask growled and sat down, his tail lashing. *Thank StarClan! We don't need unnecessary bloodshed.* Maplefur looked down over his shoulder.

The she-cat was crouched behind him, trembling as she stared up at him gratefully. "Thank you," She sighed in relief.

She can't be a threat. Maplefur thought as he watched her, nervous and shivering on the ground. *She looks terrified.*

It wasn't long before Poppywing returned, followed by Stormstar. Maplefur stepped back from the she-cat. When the dark gray tabby saw her, he growled. "Identify yourself at once. You reek of Bone Shred's rogues."

The she-cat nervously sat up, meeting the leader's gaze uneasily. "M-my name is Poisoned Sap. I-I was one of his rogues, but-"

Crowmask immediately snarled. "I told you! Send her away!"

"Quiet!" Stormstar snapped, and the black warrior reluctantly fell silent. The ShadowClan leader looked at Poisoned Sap. "In that case, get off of our territory."

"No, please listen!" Poisoned Sap pleaded, lowering herself to the ground. "Bone Shred was my brother. He forced me to join him, to help him attack the clans, to kill and do terrible things, but..." She shivered. "I never wanted any part of it!"

Maplefur felt his heart sink with sympathy for her. *She's never been able to live a life of her own.* He couldn't imagine living like that, under the complete control of another cat.

Stormstar's eyes were hard and cold as Poisoned Sap went on. "When we came here, I saw your way of life. You live in peace, go where you please, and you don't kill unless you have to. That's the kind of life that I've always wanted. Please, I'd like to join ShadowClan."

"What?" Crowmask leaped to his paws. "That's crazy! Why would we let a murderer join us?"

The golden she-cat whimpered. "I'm not a murderer! I mean- I didn't want to be! Please, please forgive me for everything I've done. I beg you. I just want a home and a place to live in peace. I have nowhere else to go."

We can't turn her away. Maplefur looked at Stormstar hopefully, but his leader's eyes were stone cold. "You participated in the killings of clan cats. Nothing you say can change that." He nodded to Crowmask. "Kill her."

Crowmask started forward, but Maplefur leaped in the way and faced him, bristling. "No!"

The black tom snarled, and Stormstar looked furious. "Maplefur, move aside!" He ordered.

He hesitated, but decided to disobey his clan leader. "Stormstar, we cannot turn away a helpless she-cat! I believe that she's telling the

truth. Didn't you hear about Howlstorm and Dandeliontail at the last gathering?"

"That's right," Bluerain admitted with an awkward glance at her leader. "They were two of Bone Shred's rogues, yet they turned out to be good cats under the rule of a monster. WindClan trained and made them warriors."

Stormstar hesitated, seeming to consider this. "How do we know she's telling the truth?"

"What does she have to gain by lying?" Maplefur pointed out, looking down at Poisoned Sap. "She's one cat. She couldn't do any harm even if she wanted to." He looked back at Stormstar anxiously. "We can't kill a cat for doing things that she didn't want to do. She was forced, just like Howlstorm and Dandeliontail. I say she deserves a chance."

The cats were quiet for a moment. Stormstar looked deep in thought, his tail twitching slowly.

"Please..." Poisoned Sap stared up at him hopefully. "I want to start over. I want to be a warrior."

Poppywing studied her. "She seems innocent enough," She commented quietly. Beside her, Crowmask's eyes were narrowed to slits.

Let her join us. Maplefur silently begged. *I don't want to see her die. She's been through enough. She deserves a new life, a better life.* Beside him, Poisoned Sap was staring at Stormstar anxiously.

"Very well," The ShadowClan leader meowed at last, and Crowmask hissed in annoyance, but he ignored him. "Poisoned Sap, you may join ShadowClan. But we'll be keeping an eye on you, and it'll take some time for you to earn our trust."

Crowmask growled. "Especially mine." He turned sharply and headed back through the trees.

"Follow us." Stormstar turned and started following the black tom in the direction of the camp, Poppywing and Bluerain close behind.

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Poisoned Sap stood up, satisfaction flooding through her as the warriors turned away. *It worked! Bone Shred was right.* She thought coolly. *Clan cats are fools.*

"Are you alright?" The cream tabby looked at her worriedly, and she looked at him thoughtfully. *And this one might be the softest fool of them all.*

She quickly put on her act again. "A little shaken, but I'll be alright." As they padded side by side behind the others, she looked at him gratefully. "Thank you. You saved my life."

The tom dipped his head. "I wouldn't let an innocent cat die." He paused. "My name is Maplefur."

"Well, I'm glad you were here, Maplefur," Poisoned Sap meowed and looked at him, trying to seem nervous. "W-will your clan be angry with me?"

Maplefur brushed his shoulder against hers. "It might take some time for them to trust you," He admitted. "But they'll come around, don't worry." He paused, then added, "You'll love life in ShadowClan. I'm sure you'll settle in and be a great warrior."

This might be easier than I thought. Poisoned Sap thought and smiled at him. "I'm sure I'll be very happy here. I look forward to becoming one of you."

Maplefur let out a purr, and Poisoned Sap looked ahead as they neared a thorn tunnel that led into the camp. She felt cold excitement pulse through her veins. She longed to unsheathe her claws and kill as many cats as she could once she was inside.

Not yet. I will make the clans pay, but all in good time. She thought with a purr as she stepped into the mottled shadows of the thorn tunnel. She looked down at the shadowy splotches cast from the leaves and thorns above, imagining that they were dark pools of blood under her paws. Shadows of blood.

THE END

Final Allegiances

RIVERCLAN

Leader: Shimmerstar - Dappled silver she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Deputy: Frostedcloud - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Warriors

Mudslip - Brown tom with darker ears, tail tip, and paws, black muzzle, green eyes.

Swanpool - Slender white she-cat with black tail tip, ears, muzzle, and toes, ice blue eyes.
Apprentice, Tansypaw

Petalfin - Silver, dark gray, black, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Dipfoot - Gray tom with silver paws, blue eyes.

Winterlight - Long furred dark gray and pale yellow she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Ruskapaw

Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Duckwing - Dark brown tabby tom with sea green eyes.

Apprentice, Thunderpaw

Heartsong - Silver and white she-cat with black ears and tail, blue eyes.

Darkminnow - Sleek black tom with dark teal eyes.
Apprentice, Frostpaw

Mintfrost - White tom with small silver tabby patches, green eyes.

Arcticblaze - Small white tom with ice blue eyes.

Dovewhisper- Pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale green eyes.

Risingmoon - White she-cat with dark gray and silver tabby points, blue eyes.

Apprentices

Thunderpaw - Dark gray and black tabby tom with dark blue eyes.

Ruskapaw - Tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes.

Frostpaw - Mottled pale brown and white speckled tom with a white face and legs, blue eyes.

Tansypaw - Light golden brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Queens

Cherryberry - Red and ginger she-cat with amber eyes. Mother to Divetail's kits:

Lemonkit - White tom with yellow patches and yellow eyes.

Rainkit - Silver she-cat with darker splashes, light blue eyes.

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Warmmoss - Light brown and white she-cat with pale green-yellow eyes. Expecting Mintfrost's kits.

SHADOWCLAN

Leader: Stormstar - Dark gray tabby tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Depthwater- Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Medicine cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewpaw

Warriors

Silverblossom - Silver spotted she-cat with ice blue eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Copperpaw

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flamepaw

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Diamondpaw

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Timberpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, and nose blaze, black ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Flamepaw - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperpaw - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Dewpaw - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Diamondpaw - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, white chest, muzzle, and chin, ice blue eyes.

Queens

Sunflower - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. Mother to Depthwater's kits:

Blackkit - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownkit - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Snakekit - Brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

THUNDERCLAN

Leader: Birchstar -Light brown tabby and white tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Strawberryspots - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Whiskerface - Light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Greenpetal - White she-cat with bright green eyes.

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Birdsong - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Shiningstream - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Snowtuft- Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Breezemoon - Gray and white she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Queens

Lightmist - Silver and white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Elders

Lizardspots - Brown spotted tom with green eyes.

Bananapelt - Creamy white tom with yellow stripes,yellow eyes.

WINDCLAN

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Warriors:

Whitefrost - White she-cat with blue eyes.

Cornwhisker - Golden tabby and white tom with yellow eyes.

Wetbelly - Dark gray tabby tom with a black underbelly, blue eyes.

Darkstorm - Black tom with green eyes.

Firetail - Orange tom with a red tail and ears, yellow eyes.

Soakedears - Very dark gray tom with black ears and paws, dark green eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Driftrunner- Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Howlstorm - Dark gray tom with green eyes.

Dandeliontail - Yellow tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

Queens

Featherblaze -Pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest, amber eyes. Nursing Weaselnose and Dreamwhisper's kits:

Starkit - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Blazingkit - Golden yellow tom with yellow eyes.

Petalkit - Yellow, orange, and white she-cat with yellow eyes.

SKYCLAN

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Clearwing - Pale gray tom with yellow eyes.

Medicine cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Paleclaw - White tom with green eyes.

Daisysong - Ginger tabby and cream she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Tanpelt - Light brown tom with pale yellow eyes.

Softheart - Tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Tigerpaw

Tallblossom - Tortoiseshell and white splashed she-cat with green eyes.

Stagleap - Dark brown and black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Tigerpaw - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Cats outside the clans

Sulfur - Pale yellow and cream tom with yellow eyes.

Violet - Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a purple collar with a bell.

Parrot - Tortoiseshell tom with green eyes. Wears a rainbow collar with rainbow feathers on it.

Pearl - Pretty Siamese she-cat with blue eyes. Wears a blue collar with a diamond tag.